

IA DRANG 1965

The Struggle for Vietnam's Pleiku Province



**J.P. HARRIS &
J. KENNETH EWARD**

ILLUSTRATED BY EDOUARD GROULT

CAMPAIGN 345

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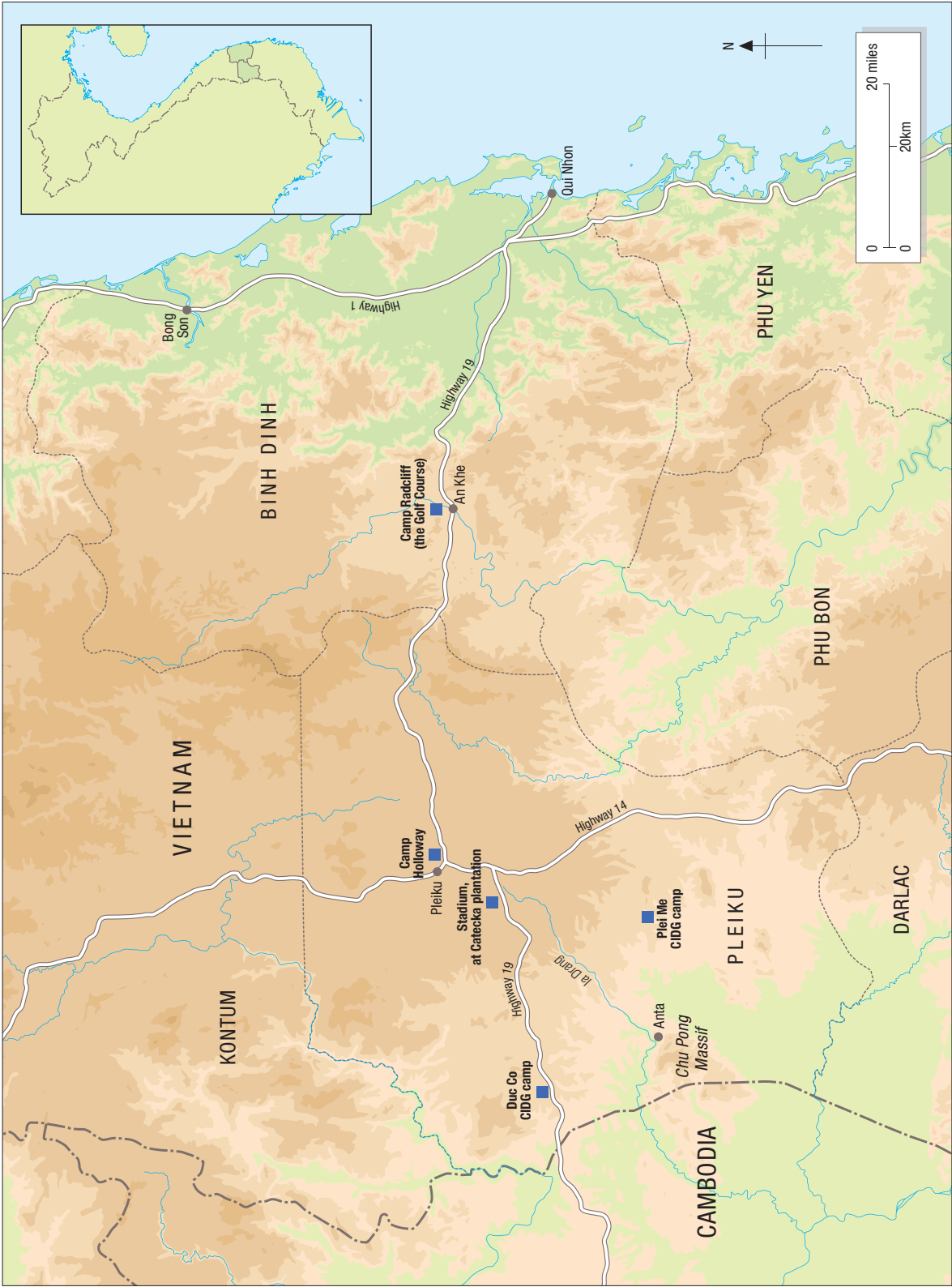
**J. P. HARRIS AND
J. KENNETH EWARD**

ILLUSTRATED BY EDOUARD GROULT
Series editor Marcus Cowper

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Pleiku and Binh Dinh provinces



THE STRATEGIC BACKGROUND

In 1954, following the defeat of the French and their indigenous allies by Communist-led forces in the First Indochina War (1946–54), Vietnam was divided at the 17th Parallel. North Vietnam, with its capital at Hanoi, was ruled by the Communist Party. An anti-Communist state was established in the South, with its capital at Saigon. The Hanoi government soon instigated a Communist insurgency in South Vietnam, thereby initiating the Second Indochina War (1959–75). In 1965 the war intensified dramatically: in an effort to bring about the final collapse of the anti-Communist state, the Hanoi government was now sending to South Vietnam whole regiments of People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) troops raised, equipped, and trained in the North.¹

The South Vietnamese state (the Republic of Vietnam), though suffering from problems of corruption and political instability, was proving difficult to destroy. The Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) had American equipment and growing numbers of American advisors. RVNAF ground forces also had mobility provided by American helicopter units and close air support from American aircraft as well as from the South Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF). Since 1961 the CIA and US Army Special Forces had also been trying to mobilize, equip, and train elements of South Vietnam's numerous ethnic and religious minorities in the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) initiative.

The CIDG program was of particular importance in the Central Highlands, a mountainous and jungle-clad region where more than half of the population consisted of minority ethnic groups. Both sides recognized the strategic importance of the Central Highlands and made major efforts to control that region. Many of the supply and infiltration routes running from North Vietnam via Laos (often collectively known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail) entered South Vietnam in the Central Highlands. South Vietnam's adjacent coastal plain was relatively narrow and control of the Highlands might give the Communists the opportunity to cut the southern state in half.

Both sides recruited men from Highland ethnic minorities as soldiers. But some Highlanders disliked being used as cannon fodder in a Vietnamese civil war. In September 1964, in Darlac Province, there was a brief but alarming mutiny of Highland troops in the CIDG program, some of whom supported a movement for independence for the Central Highlands. Fear of

1 Although "People's Army of Vietnam" was (and continues to be) the official designation of the Communist regular army, it was commonly called the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) during the war by its American opponents. This term is still in popular use in the United States today, though it should be kept in mind that "NVA" is a descriptor and not a formal name.



New technology and new tactics: H-21 Shawnee helicopters of the US Army return South Vietnamese troops from a mission early in the war, during the American advisory period. The US Army conducted joint heliborne missions with the ARVN for years before fielding its own organic airmobile division in 1965. By this time, helicopters were no longer new to their North Vietnamese opponents, who had developed techniques to deal with them. But despite an appearance of fragility, helicopters proved themselves in combat, becoming a ubiquitous and indispensable element of US and ARVN operations to the conclusion of the war. (US Army)

CIDG troops and US Special Forces advisors on patrol in 1964. The Civilian Irregular Defense Group program provided a means of self-defense to communities of the Central Highlands in the years before the commitment of regular US military forces. (Larry Burrows/The Life Picture Collection/Getty Images)

further outbreaks of this nature would dog the anti-Communist war effort in the region.

Using PAVN regiments that arrived there early in 1965, the Communist high command sought to draw into the Central Highlands and destroy the

strategic reserves of the South Vietnamese state—its Marine and Airborne battalions. By August 1965 the Communists had, after intense fighting, taken control of large areas of Kontum, Pleiku, and Phu Bon provinces. But they had failed to destroy South Vietnam's strategic reserves and had themselves sustained some bloody defeats. Meanwhile, major US ground forces had begun to arrive in South Vietnam and the Americans had begun to bomb the North.



CHRONOLOGY

1946–54

First Indochina War.

1954

Geneva Accords: Vietnam partitioned at 17th Parallel.

1959–75

Second Indochina War.

October–November 1965

Pleiku Campaign.

October 19, 1965

Beginning of the siege of Plei Me.

October 22, 1965

South Vietnamese Airborne Rangers and US Project Delta personnel reinforce Plei Me.

October 23, 1965

Armored Task Force advances toward Plei Me and fights battle with PAVN 33rd Regiment.

October 25, 1965

Plei Me relieved.

October 26, 1965

PAVN attacks part of Armored Task Force just outside Plei Me.

October 27, 1965

US 1st Cavalry Division commences search/pursuit operation.

October 28–November 1, 1965

Fuel supply crisis threatens Cavalry Division operations in Pleiku.

November 1, 1965

Hospital firefight.

November 3–4, 1965

Ia Drang² ambush and LZ Mary firefight.

November 6, 1965

1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division's last substantial firefight in the Pleiku campaign.

November 7, 1965

Major General Kinnard decides to pull 1st Brigade out of the Pleiku campaign and substitute 3rd Brigade.

November 9–12, 1965

3rd Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division takes over from 1st Brigade.

November 12–13, 1965

PAVN night raid on Catecka.

November 14, 1965

1/7 Cavalry air assaults into LZ X-Ray.

November 14–16, 1965

Firefight at LZ X-Ray.

November 17, 1965

Firefight at LZ Albany.

November 18, 1965

Actions at LZ Crooks and LZ Columbus.

November 18–20, 1965

2nd Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division replaces 1st Brigade in the Pleiku campaign.

November 18–27, 1965

ARVN Airborne Brigade operations in western Pleiku.

Late November

Shattered regiments of the Central Highlands Front complete their retreat into Cambodia.

² "Ia" is a Montagnard word meaning "river."

OPPOSING COMMANDERS

NORTH VIETNAMESE

The instigator of the Pleiku campaign of October–November 1965 was **Major General Chu Huy Man** (1913–2006), whose real name was Chu Van Dieu. Born in Hung Hoa village, Hung Nguyen District, Nghe An Province, a part of central Vietnam north of the 17th Parallel, he began to oppose French imperialism as a teenager and joined the Communist Party in 1930. Sent to a prison camp in Kontum Province in 1940, he escaped in 1943. In 1945 he helped lead an insurrection in Quang Nam Province and subsequently became political officer of a military unit raised there. Between 1951 and 1954, during the First Indochina War, he served as deputy political commissar and then political commissar of the 316th Division. Early in the Second Indochina War he commanded Group 100—North Vietnamese military specialists working in Laos. In 1964–65 he was political commissar



Major General Chu Huy Man commanded PAVN forces in the Central Highlands. His decision to invest the Plei Me CIDG camp in October 1965 precipitated the major battles in the Ia Drang Valley the following month. Here he is seen (on right) consulting with PAVN General Nguyen Chi Thanh in 1964. (Socialist Republic of Vietnam)

of Military Region 5, and from July 1965 he commanded the Central Highlands (B3) Front. This became, in effect, a division headquarters with three PAVN regiments under his command. Man's initial plan for the Pleiku campaign was a complete failure and he exercised no control over events in the subsequent battles at LZ X-Ray and LZ Albany, having not been in the right places at the right times. Yet his career continued to advance. He retired with the rank of senior general.

Man's deputy was **Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Huu An (1926–95)**, a native of Truong Yen village, Tan Diep District, Ninh Binh Province. He joined the Communist Party in 1945 and served throughout the First Indochina War, rising from private soldier to regimental commander. Between 1955 and 1964 he served successively as deputy chief of staff and deputy chief of staff of the North-western Military Region. In 1965 he was deputy commander of the Central Highlands Front. He was physically present on the Chu Pong Massif at the time of the LZ X-Ray battle, though neither he nor anyone else seems to have been able to exert much overall control of PAVN troops in that engagement. One of his decisions during that battle would, however, lead to the clash at LZ Albany. He commanded the 1st Division at Dak To in 1967. He eventually retired with the rank of colonel general.

SOUTH VIETNAMESE

In June 1965 acting **Major General Nguyen Phuoc Vinh Loc (1923–2009)** took command of South Vietnam's II Corps, the Corps Tactical Zone (CTZ) which covered the Central Highlands and adjacent areas of the coastal plain. Born in Hue in 1923 to the family that had constituted Vietnam's last imperial dynasty, he received French military training. In 1951 he went to the French Armored Cavalry School at Saumur and he served on the French side in the First Indochina War. In 1953 he gained a battlefield promotion to the rank of captain when his 3rd Armored Reconnaissance Company beat off an ambush. After the 1954 partition of Vietnam his career prospered in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).

Vinh Loc was wealthy. As II Corps commander he lived in some style, appearing to cultivate an air of imperial grandeur. Most senior American officers were not impressed. They thought his condescending attitude to Highland ethnic groups particularly unhelpful to the anti-Communist war effort. Within a short time of Vinh Loc's appointment to II Corps, William Westmoreland, the senior American commander in Vietnam, was lobbying the South Vietnamese government to have him replaced. Though the Pleiku campaign took place within his area of responsibility, the Americans largely cut him out of the decision-making process for most of it. He was replaced at II Corps in 1968. He remained in the ARVN until 1975 when he fled to the US.

Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Huu An, deputy of General Chu Huy Man, unexpectedly found himself senior commander of PAVN forces during the battle at LZ X-Ray. A postwar photograph taken after his promotion to colonel general. (Socialist Republic of Vietnam)



Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Trong Luat (1929–2005) commanded the ARVN Armored Task Force (ATF) that played an important part in the Pleiku campaign. Luat was born in 1929 in Long Xuyen Province in Vietnam's far south. He joined the armed forces on October 17, 1951, serving on the French/anti-Communist side in the First Indochina War. Little is known about his military career before he commanded the ATF in 1965. In Pleiku in 1965 his command fought two battles with the PAVN 32nd Regiment, one in July as part of a successful campaign to relieve the CIDG/Special Forces camp at Duc Co, and the second in October, going to relieve the CIDG/Special Forces Camp at Plei Me. He was a colonel when the war ended. After 14 years in prison, he left Vietnam for the US.

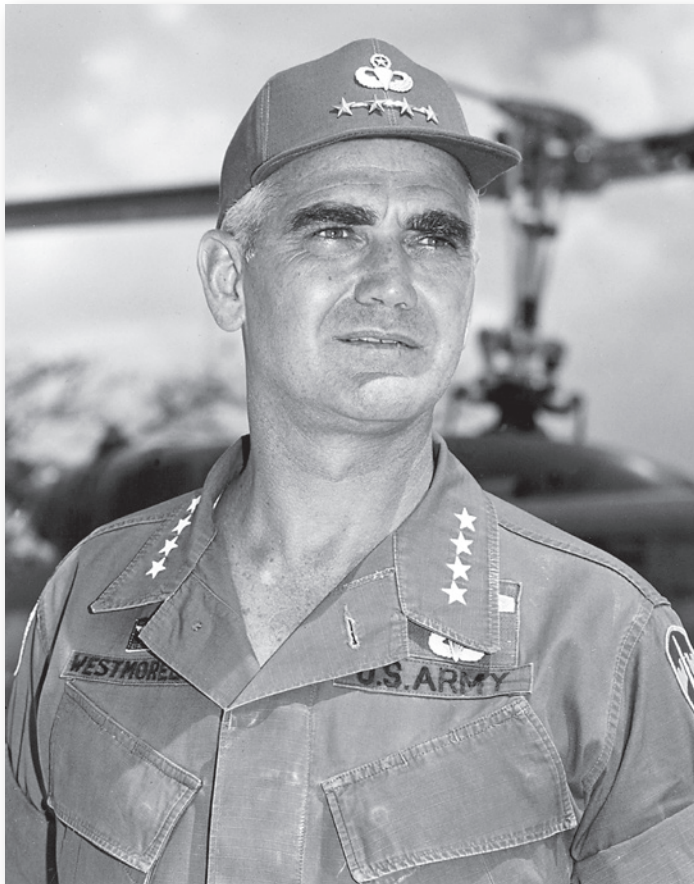
AMERICAN

General William C. Westmoreland, appointed commander of American Forces in Vietnam in 1964, bore the responsibility of developing a strategy for the Pleiku campaign the following year. (US Air Force)

General William Childs Westmoreland (1914–2005) was commander of the United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam (COMUSMACV) during the Pleiku campaign. Born in Spartanburg County, South Carolina to an affluent family, Westmoreland had enjoyed a stellar military career. At West Point, from which he graduated in 1936, he was awarded the Pershing Sword for the cadet with the highest level of military proficiency. Rising rapidly in rank, he commanded 34th Field Artillery Battalion, 9th Infantry

Division in Tunisia and Sicily in World War II before becoming chief of staff of the 9th Infantry Division in 1944 and serving in that capacity in France and Germany. In November 1952 Westmoreland was promoted brigadier general. After commanding the elite 101st Airborne Division 1958–60, he was superintendent of West Point 1960–63 and briefly commander of the XVIII Corps before going to Vietnam to join Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), which organized American military assistance to the South Vietnamese government, in 1963. He was deputy commander of MACV January to June 1964 and commander from June.

Westmoreland's strategy was still evolving at the time of the Pleiku campaign. But he realized that American forces would have to fight a limited war in Indochina. Having taken an interest in counterinsurgency before coming to Vietnam, Westmoreland realized that success there would require a counterinsurgency effort as well as more conventional warfare. In 1965, however, he was inclined to give





US 1st Cavalry Division commander Major General Harry W. O. Kinnard led the division through its establishment and subsequent trial by fire in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Kinnard was an enthusiastic proponent of the air mobility concept, to overcome what he termed the “tyranny of terrain” in deploying ground forces. Kinnard is seen here at Fort Benning in 1964 during workup of the new division, at that time known as the 11th Air Assault Division (Test). (US Army)

priority to dealing with the enemy’s biggest and best-equipped units, especially the PAVN. Westmoreland was replaced as COMUSMACV in 1968 and retired in 1972.

In the hierarchy of American commanders involved in the Pleiku campaign, **Major General Stanley “Swede” Larsen (1915–2000)** came immediately below Westmoreland. Born on Honolulu, Hawaii in 1915, Larsen was, like Westmoreland, a graduate of West Point with a distinguished World War II record. Serving in the 35th Infantry Regiment, he commanded its 2nd Battalion in the Second Battle of Mount Austen in the Guadalcanal campaign in January 1943. His career continued to make good progress after the war and he commanded the 8th Infantry Division from November 1962 to April 1964 before being posted to Vietnam.

In August 1965 Westmoreland appointed Larsen to command Task Force Alpha, later called Field Force Vietnam. This made Larsen, in effect, a corps commander for American divisions serving in Vietnam. Vietnam, however, was already divided into four Corps Tactical Zones, each the responsibility of a South Vietnamese corps. The Americans had no intention of allowing South Vietnamese corps commanders to command American divisions. They wanted their own chain of command. Yet the American use of the term “corps” might, Westmoreland considered, create confusion with the pre-existing South Vietnamese system. Hence Larsen was called a “Task Force” and later a “Field Force” commander rather than a corps commander. The

US Army's 1st Cavalry Division came under Larsen's task force during the Pleiku campaign. To maximize his influence on the campaign in Pleiku, on October 21, 1965 Westmoreland also appointed Larsen senior American advisor to Major General Vinh Loc, commanding the South Vietnamese II Corps. At times Larsen's interventions appear to have had a major impact on the campaign. It is unclear whether the campaign had any impact on his career. Larsen retired as a lieutenant general in 1972.

Major General Harry W. O. Kinnard (1915–2009) was the commander of the American 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) in the Pleiku campaign. Born in 1915, Kinnard grew up in Dallas, Texas. Having graduated from West Point in 1939, he was serving at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 when the Japanese attacked. After training as an airborne officer, he parachuted into Normandy on D-Day June 6, 1944. He took part in Operation *Market-Garden*, winning the Distinguished Service Cross, and in December served in the headquarters of the 101st Airborne Division in the siege of Bastogne. In 1963 he was selected to command the 11th Air Assault Division (Test) at Fort Benning, Georgia which was to conduct experiments in helicopter-borne air mobility. Kinnard seized on the idea of air mobility with great enthusiasm. Reporting the experiments as major successes, he continued to command the division under its new designation, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), and went to Vietnam with it in September 1965. Eager to prove the "airmobile concept," he considered tackling the Communist units involved in the siege

of Plei Me an ideal opportunity. He successfully lobbied to get that mission for his division—with mixed results. He retired as a lieutenant general in 1969.

Kinnard largely delegated the conduct of the campaign in Pleiku to his deputy, **Colonel Richard T. Knowles (1916–2013)**. Born in Chicago and commissioned through the University of Illinois Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program, Knowles became an artillery officer and served with tank destroyers in World War II. Later, in Korea, he was awarded a Silver Star. Generally regarded as a good leader, cool in a crisis, Knowles was known for offering subordinates excellent cigars when he went to visit them in the field. During the Pleiku campaign it is often very hard to know which decisions he took and which were left to the brigade commanders serving under him. It is thus very difficult to assess how much credit he deserves for

Assisting Kinnard as deputy commander of the 1st Cavalry Division was Brigadier General Richard T. Knowles, who handled the details of the division's operations in the Pleiku campaign. (US Army)





Lieutenant Colonel Harold G. "Hal" Moore, commander of the 1/7 Cavalry, best known for his actions at LZ X-Ray. Moore is thought by many to have been the 1st Cavalry Division's ablest battalion commander. He is pictured in 1964, after assuming command of the 2nd Battalion, 23rd Infantry Regiment at Fort Benning. Assigned to the 11th Air Assault Division (Test) during its creation, this battalion would be reborn as the 1/7 Cavalry. (US Army)

the relative American success at X-Ray and how much blame he should take for the subsequent shambles at Albany. He did a further tour in Vietnam and retired a lieutenant general in 1974.

Under Knowles' overall direction, the Cavalry Division brigade commanders principally involved in the Pleiku campaign were **Lieutenant Colonel Harlow Clark** (1921–66), who commanded 1st Brigade, and **Colonel Thomas "Tim" Brown** (1919–2002), commanding 3rd Brigade. Clark, a Georgian, had enlisted in the army in 1942. In World War II he had received a Purple Heart, a Bronze Star with Oak Leaf Cluster, and a Silver Star with Oak Leaf Cluster. He was promoted lieutenant in 1945. His career continued to make good progress after World War II and he reached the rank of lieutenant colonel in 1963. When the Pleiku campaign began, he had, however, only recently taken over command of 1st Brigade from a superior who had gone for medical treatment. Possibly because Kinnard considered Clark insufficiently experienced as a brigade commander, he sent Knowles to supervise 1st Brigade's operations a few days into the

campaign. How command and control was divided between Knowles and Clark is not entirely clear. Clark died in a helicopter crash in Vietnam in March 1966.

Brown was born in West Point, New York, the son of an army officer. He graduated from the United States Military Academy in an accelerated wartime class in 1943 and served with the 11th Airborne Division in the Philippines 1944–45. Like his immediate superior, Dick Knowles, he had also served in Korea, where he had won both the Bronze Star and the Silver Star. Over six feet tall, Brown was rather quiet and undemonstrative, but he had the reputation of being a careful planner. As in the case of Clark, the previous brigade commander in the Pleiku campaign, it is difficult to say which decisions Brown took and which were taken for him by Knowles. The LZ Albany battle seems to have damaged his reputation and military career. He retired at the rank of brigadier general in 1973.

Lieutenant Colonel Harold “Hal” Moore (1922–2017) commanded the 1st Battalion of the 7th Cavalry Regiment (1/7 Cavalry) in the firefight at LZ X-Ray—the most famous action of the Pleiku campaign of 1965. By the time of that battle he had already been in command of 1/7 Cavalry for 18 months and, having been selected for promotion to full colonel, was soon due to leave the battalion. Born in Bardstown, Kentucky, Moore graduated from West Point in 1945 and commanded a mortar company in

the Korean War. He earned a master’s degree in international relations from George Washington University before going on to serve under Kinnard with the experimental air assault division. Tall, fair-haired, and widely regarded as charismatic, Moore was, some believed, the most effective battalion commander in the 1st Cavalry Division. His performance at LZ X-Ray boosted his reputation. He retired as a lieutenant general in 1977.

Lieutenant Colonel Robert McDade (1922–2009) was born in New York City in 1922. He enlisted in the army in 1942 and was promoted second lieutenant in 1943. He led a rifle platoon in the South Pacific in World War II and earned a Silver Star in Korea. He was also the recipient of a Bronze Star and Oak Leaf Cluster and three Purple Hearts. After Korea, however, he served mostly in staff positions. When he took command of 2/7 Cavalry in October 1965, it had been ten years since he had commanded troops. LZ Albany damaged his reputation. He retired as a colonel in 1975.

Lieutenant Colonel Robert McDade commanded 2/7 Cavalry in the campaign. Despite a commendable service record in World War II and the Korean War, he is largely remembered for the heavy casualties sustained along the route march to LZ Albany. (US Army)



OPPOSING FORCES

Though the overwhelming majority of those who did the serious fighting on the Communist side in this campaign were recruited and trained in North Vietnam, they received logistical support and guidance from locally recruited units. The focus here, however, is on the PAVN main force units. On the anti-Communist side the campaign involved an enormously wide variety of ground and air forces. Detailed accounts of all of them (which would include B-52s flown out of Guam) would require more space than here available. The focus is, therefore, on the principal ground forces involved.

THE PAVN

During the course of the Pleiku campaign Chu Huy Man's Central Highlands Front had three PAVN regiments under command, though only one of these (the 32nd) was present when planning began in mid-September 1965. A further regiment (the 33rd) would arrive in time to take part in the initial stage of the campaign, which began on October 19. The third regiment (the 66th) would complete its journey down the Ho Chi Minh Trail only after the campaign had started. In addition to the three infantry regiments assigned to Man's command, support units, including a 120mm mortar battalion and a battalion of 14.5mm heavy machine guns, were under orders to come down the Trail to join his Field Force. But these had certainly not arrived by the start of the campaign and it is not clear whether they ever participated in it.

Each PAVN regiment had an authorized strength of 2,200 men and consisted of three battalions, each with 550 men (at full strength) plus a recoilless rifle company equipped with eight recoilless rifles (75mm or 57mm, or a mixture of the two), an 82mm mortar company with eight tubes, a 12.7mm anti-aircraft machine-gun company with six machine guns, and company-sized groups of medics, engineers, transportation troops, and signalers. The three battalions each comprised three infantry companies, each of 120–125 men, plus a heavy weapons company. The heavy weapons company was supposed to have three 12.7mm heavy machine guns, four 82mm mortars, and four recoilless rifles. An infantry company had three infantry platoons each of about 35–40 men. A platoon had three squads, each of nine men grouped into three three-man cells. (These three-man cells seem to have been important “primary groups,” especially significant for maintaining motivation and morale in the close-quarter fighting that the PAVN emphasized.)

The PAVN regular soldiers faced by South Vietnamese and American forces in the Pleiku campaign were well trained and highly motivated. They possessed modern weapons supplied by their Communist allies China and Russia. (Socialist Republic of Vietnam)



All the figures for unit and subunit strength quoted in the paragraph above are official/theoretical figures. A significant rate of attrition coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, combined with sickness after arriving in the Central Highlands, would mean that none of Man's regiments would operate at anything like full strength during the Pleiku campaign.

PAVN training was tough and indoctrination thorough. There was strong emphasis on physical hardiness, field craft and camouflage, marksmanship and fire control, fluent tactical movement, and thorough entrenchment when stationary. In battle the North Vietnamese infantryman was expected to seize opportunities to close with the enemy for hand-to-hand combat and there was great emphasis on ferocity and resourcefulness in that kind of fighting. One Vietnamese Communist account of fighting in the Central Highlands in 1965 describes a PAVN officer, having run out of ammunition and with his bayonet broken, ripping out the throat of a South Vietnamese opponent with his teeth. This might be dismissed merely as lurid propaganda except that there is an American account, also from the Central Highlands in 1965, of a CIDG soldier sustaining a bite wound in a clash with the PAVN. North Vietnamese propaganda and indoctrination blamed the United States for the whole conflict. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that, in late 1965, PAVN units reportedly arrived in the South particularly keen on killing Americans.

The PAVN had serviceable and effective infantry weapons. In the Pleiku campaign of 1965 its riflemen used either the Simonov-designed SKS carbine or the Kalashnikov-designed assault rifle known as the AK-47. (One authority considers it probable that only one in every four or five PAVN riflemen had a Kalashnikov, the SKS still being by far the more common

weapon.) Both weapons were of Soviet origin but were also manufactured in some East European satellite countries and in the People's Republic of China. Both weapons were rugged and reliable. Both fired 7.62mm rimless cartridges. Both were reasonably accurate up to 300m—the vast majority of infantry combat in Vietnam occurring well within that range. The SKS was semi-automatic. The AK-47 was capable of fully automatic fire, but given the difficulty of ammunition resupply, it seems likely that in 1965 PAVN soldiers most commonly used even that weapon on semi-automatic. North Vietnamese troops commented disparagingly on the tendency of at least some American troops to blaze away into the jungle, “firing wildly and without aiming.” The Americans at X-Ray noted that many of their fatal casualties had single bullet wounds to the head. PAVN training seems to have emphasized taking deliberate, carefully aimed shots.

Given their army's stress on close-combat, it was important that PAVN infantrymen carried, in addition to a carbine or automatic rifle, a bayonet and between three and five Chinese-made “potato-masher” grenades, a type derived from the stick grenades used by the Soviets in the two world wars. Given that the PAVN could expect to face prodigious amounts of artillery fire and ordnance delivered from the air, it was especially important that every soldier carry an entrenching tool of some sort, either a shovel or a pickaxe. Digging in was very much part of the PAVN's military culture, leaders correctly believing that it saved lives and could be one of the keys to tactical success.

As its standard light machine gun (platoons holding at least one and possibly two) the PAVN used the Ruchnoi Pulyemet Degtyarova (RPD) which fired the same 7.62mm ammunition as the SKS and the AK-47. Weighing a little over 16lb when empty, it was fed from a 50- or 100-round drum. It had a rate of fire of about 700 rounds per minute (not allowing for drum changes). For defending a static position it was inferior to the American M60. But its lightness made it much easier to carry through the jungle and it was a good weapon to take into an assault. Another weapon held at platoon level was the RPG-2 rocket-propelled grenade launcher, or B-40 rocket as it was often known in Vietnam. Consisting of a 40mm lightweight tube with a pistol grip and a bar sight, it could launch an 82mm or 90mm warhead to a range of about 150m.

The 82mm mortar, a Soviet-designed weapon of the 1930s, provided the heaviest firepower available to the PAVN in this campaign. It had a rate of fire of up to 25 rounds per minute (though problems with resupply would generally force the PAVN to be sparing with ammunition) and a range of about 3,000m. The Soviet-designed DShK heavy machine gun (the equivalent of the US 0.5-in. “fifty caliber” weapon) fired a 12.7mm round at a rate of 600 rpm. It had an effective range of up to 2,000m. Though it was, of course, highly effective as an antipersonnel weapon, it had a particular value to the PAVN in the anti-aircraft role. Especially deadly against helicopters, it was also a menace to fighter-bombers at low altitude. The 57mm and 75mm recoilless rifles used by the PAVN were accurate to around 400m. Designed primarily as anti-tank weapons, they were effective against all the armored vehicles available to the anti-Communist side in Vietnam in 1965. They could also be useful as bunker busters.

Though its infantry weapons were generally of good quality, the PAVN's overall firepower was dwarfed by that of the Americans and often considerably inferior to that available to the RVNAF. (In addition to the

assistance of their own artillery and air force, South Vietnamese infantry and armor could, through their advisors, often also gain American artillery and air support.) After some experience of combat against US infantry, North Vietnamese infantrymen reportedly concluded that they were at least the equals of their American counterparts, in some respects their superiors. Yet PAVN soldiers admitted to their officers that they were awed, even terrified, by American artillery and airpower.

The PAVN was also severely handicapped compared to its enemies in terms of signals. In 1965 the North Vietnamese had no radio at platoon level. Platoon commanders usually communicated by sending runners. Field telephone equipment was held in battalion communications platoons. Battalions could equip companies with field telephones and operators if this were considered necessary. Radios were held by regimental communications companies. But North Vietnamese commanders quite rightly feared American radio interception capabilities and were inclined to maintain radio silence as much as possible. It is not clear how often radios and radio operators were provided to company commanders in 1965. Sometimes bugle calls or whistles were used to communicate simple commands at company level and below. The limited availability of radio and the restrictions on its use made command and control somewhat primitive and forced the North Vietnamese to keep their tactics simple.

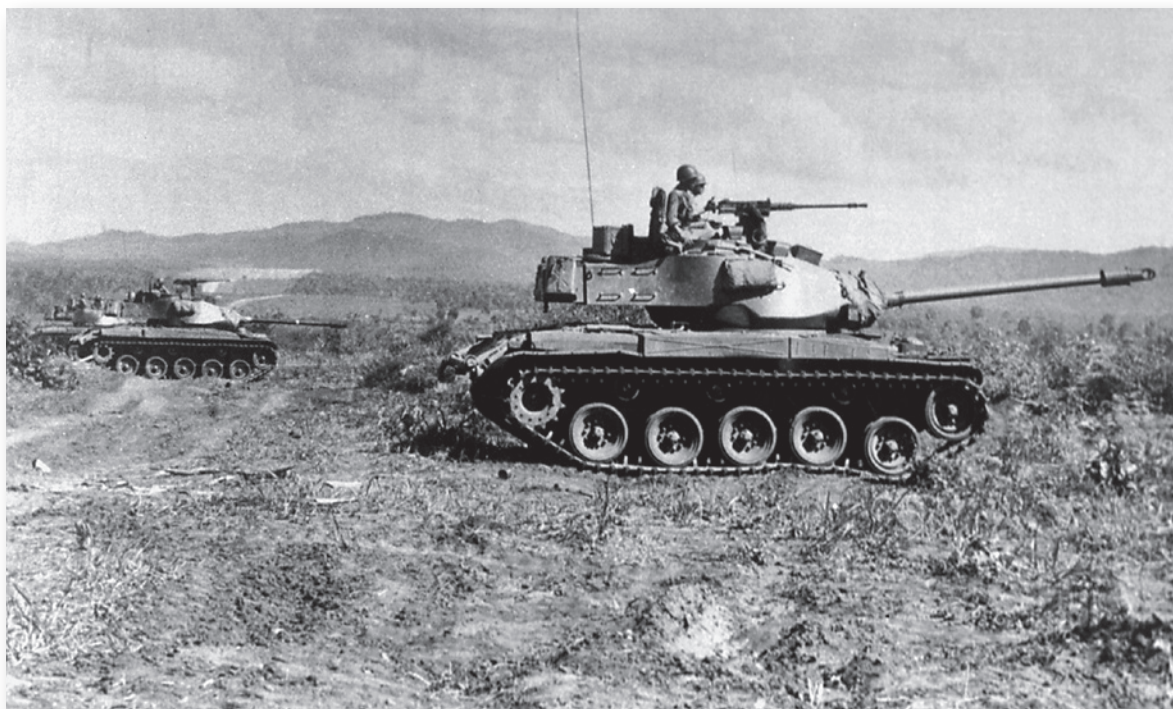
THE ARVN

The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) was, in terms of numbers of personnel, the largest of the armed forces serving the South Vietnamese

state. (There were also local militias, a Navy and an Air Force, and an armed police force.) The ARVN was actively involved in two main phases of the October–November 1965 campaign in Pleiku Province. An Armored Task Force under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Luat was sent to the relief of Plei Me in October. Then, in late November, in the last episode of the campaign, the ARVN Airborne Brigade mounted an operation in the Ia Drang Valley to intercept the PAVN retreat into Cambodia. The ARVN is usually thought to have been in very poor shape in 1965. In reality, it was a mixed bag. In this campaign some units fought very well.

The ARVN bore the brunt of the fighting during the early and later phases of the war. ARVN troops were sometimes criticized for lacking resolve, but generally fought well during the 1965 Pleiku campaign. They were supplied with (at this stage of the war) often-obsolete American equipment. This ARVN intelligence squad, photographed in 1963, is reminiscent of American troops of World War II or the Korean War. (Lt. Charles C. Conn/US Army)





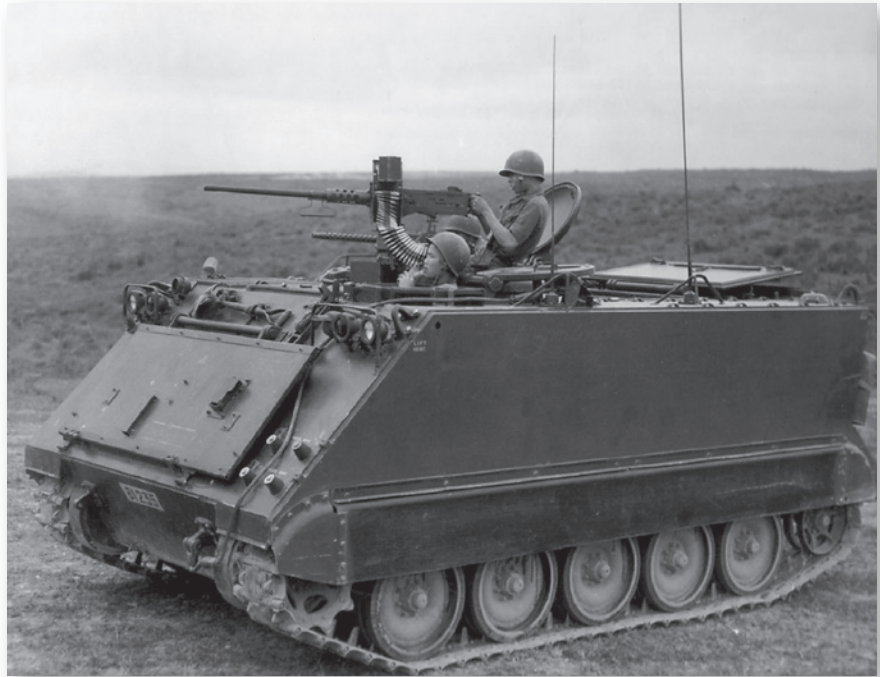
In addition to its tanks and armored personnel carriers, Luat's force eventually included most of an ordinary infantry battalion and two Ranger battalions. In 1965 an ARVN infantry battalion had an authorized strength of 714 but was often operating with half that number. Most of its soldiers were conscripts. It consisted of three rifle companies, and a headquarters and heavy weapons company. Rifle companies had a headquarters, three rifle platoons, and a heavy weapons platoon. The rifle platoon had a headquarters and three rifle squads. Rifle squads were supposed to be 11 strong but tended to be smaller in practice.

In this period ARVN infantry were equipped with American World War II weapons including M1 rifles and Browning Automatic Rifles (BARs), with two BARs per squad. These were serviceable weapons but were bulky and heavy in relation to the men using them, who were generally, by Western standards, short and slightly built. In addition to 60 BARs, an ARVN infantry battalion was supposed to have 32 submachine guns and six 0.30-caliber machine guns. The battalion HQ and Support Company held four 81mm mortars and four 57mm recoilless rifles. The battalion's six 60mm mortars appear to have been allocated to the mortar sections within the weapons platoons of the three rifle companies: two tubes per mortar section. Rifle company weapons platoons also held two bazookas and two 0.30-caliber machine guns.

Rangers were the light infantry of the ARVN and constituted one of its elites. Ranger battalions were assigned fewer personnel overall and fewer heavy weapons than standard infantry battalions but more officers and NCOs. A substantially higher proportion of their personnel were volunteers. Rather than the three rifle companies and one HQ and Support Company of the standard infantry battalion, Ranger battalions had four rifle companies. Ranger battalions had no 81mm mortars or bazookas, but were allocated 30 grenade launchers of two different types. They had fewer BARs and M1 rifles

The armored task force sent to relieve Plei Me benefitted from the earlier American decision to replace the ARVN's aged and mechanically unreliable armored vehicles with modern types such as the M41A3 Walker Bulldog tank. Its light construction made it ideal for much of the terrain on which ARVN troops fought, and though cramped by Western standards, its fighting compartment was adequate for the smaller-statured Vietnamese crews. (US Army)

The M113 armored personnel carrier was another modern AFV supplied to South Vietnam by its American ally. This early example lacks the supplemental gunner shields provided in later models. (US Army)



than standard infantry battalions and a higher proportion of submachine guns and M1 and M2 carbines—lighter weapons that South Vietnamese soldiers appear to have preferred.

The ARVN Airborne Brigade, together with the Marine Brigade, constituted South Vietnam's strategic reserve. The Airborne Brigade, which was the principal force engaged on the anti-Communist side in the last phase of the 1965 Pleiku campaign, had six battalions. These were closer in structure to Ranger than to standard infantry battalions, having four rifle companies, but they had rather more heavy weapons than the Rangers did, with four 81mm mortars in the Headquarters Company. They seem generally to have had, like the Rangers, a larger number of officers and NCOs than the standard infantry battalion and a higher proportion of volunteers amongst their enlisted men.

US AND SOUTH VIETNAMESE SPECIAL FORCES AND CIDG

The first Americans to come under North Vietnamese attack during the Pleiku campaign and the first to die in it were members of A-217, the US Army Special Forces (USASF) A-detachment (aka A-Team) based at Plei Me. Most US Army Special Forces serving in Vietnam in 1965 worked in the CIDG program and belonged to an A, B, or C detachment. A detachments were deployed in the most dangerous locations, helping to organize, train, and lead indigenous personnel. B detachments administered and supported them from locations considered rather safer. C detachments administered B detachments from rear areas (in so far as anything in Vietnam could be so regarded). A-217 had some 12–14 personnel (accounts differ) based at Plei Me.

USASF personnel often, though not always, had airborne training, and were selected for intelligence and initiative as well as basic soldierly skills. They were well armed—often getting the newest and best weapons, such as the lightweight AR-15 automatic rifle (which was developed into the M16) and the M79 grenade launcher, ahead of other troops. In addition to providing military training and leadership to the ethnic or religious minorities with whom they worked, they often also provided paramedical services for these soldiers and their families.

USASF personnel were supposed to cooperate closely with South Vietnamese Special Forces (VNSF) at CIDG camps. The quality of South Vietnamese Special Forces (hurriedly expanded in the mid-1960s) was, however, very inconsistent and many Vietnamese (including some in the SF) had little but contempt for ethnic minorities, especially Highlanders. (On the other hand, some VNSF officers and soldiers were themselves from Highland ethnic groups.) As the South Vietnamese government did not entirely trust American Special Forces and Highlanders, in theory the senior Vietnamese Special Forces officer was always the camp commander at SF/CIDG camps.

During the siege, Plei Me was reinforced by other Special Forces elements whose normal roles were somewhat different—US Project Delta and South Vietnamese 91st Airborne Ranger troops. USASF troops assigned to Project Delta had the mission of identifying concentrations of Communist main force troops in order to bring down air strikes, especially B-52 strikes, upon them. Project Delta was supported by the South Vietnamese 91st Airborne Ranger Battalion, which, according to some accounts, had a high proportion of troops from Highland ethnic minorities. Fifteen members of Project Delta, under the command of Major Charles Beckwith, and two companies of Airborne Rangers (about 150 personnel), commanded by a Major Thut, arrived in the besieged camp on October 22. While at least some Project Delta personnel had M16 rifles, the Vietnamese Airborne Rangers appear to have been equipped with older weapons such as the BAR, M2 carbine, and Thompson submachine gun.

The largest group of Plei Me's defenders comprised its Civilian Irregular Defense Group soldiers, mostly recruited from the Jarai, the largest ethnic group in the area. At the start of the campaign a total of 415 of these troops were based at Plei Me, though not all were inside the camp when the siege began. Mainly equipped with older small arms like the M2 carbine and the BAR, they had also been given some training in firing heavy weapons such as the camp's mortars and 0.5-in. machine guns. Highland troops, such as the Jarai soldiers at Plei Me, were, in



Highlanders of the CIDG project pose for the camera. The Highland ethnic minorities were not racially, culturally, or linguistically Vietnamese. Race relations between Highlanders and Vietnamese were typically poor. The CIDG was originally a CIA/US Army Special Forces initiative to help Highlanders defend their villages against Vietnamese Communist incursions. By 1965, however, MACV had taken over the project. So-called CIDG personnel were increasingly used as regular troops and based in forts like Plei Me rather than employed defending their own villages. (George H. Kelling Collection/The Vietnam Center and Archive/Texas Tech University)



Shoulder sleeve insignia of the 1st Cavalry Division. The new 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), constituted from the 11th Air Assault Division (Test) in 1965, assumed the unit designations, colors, and traditions of the 1st Cavalry Division, established in 1921—a time when horses, not helicopters, were the principal mode of transport. (US Army)

general, more comfortable in the forests of the Central Highlands than Americans or Vietnamese and were generally quite good at small-unit fighting in that environment. Yet, though many were highly intelligent, for cultural reasons Highlanders sometimes had initial difficulty adjusting to the more sophisticated military technologies and to the use of maps. The Americans seem also to have been uncertain how well they would endure being on the receiving end of relatively heavy Communist fire from mortars and recoilless rifles in a protracted siege.

THE US 1ST CAVALRY DIVISION

The 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) was the first complete US Army division to arrive in Vietnam. Though it claimed heritage from famous regiments of the American past (such as the 7th Cavalry of George Armstrong Custer fame) this division was actually a very recent creation, in the process of inventing its own

traditions. Officially established only about three months before its arrival in Vietnam, it was the successor of an experimental formation: the 11th Air Assault Division (Test), which carried out airmobile exercises in Georgia and the Carolinas in 1964 and the early months of 1965.

When it arrived in Vietnam, at the port of Qui Nhon in Binh Dinh Province, in September 1965, the 1st Cavalry Division consisted of an airmobile reconnaissance squadron (1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry), three brigades (comprising nine battalions) of airmobile infantry, six battalions of



Troops of the 1st Cavalry Division begin their long journey to Vietnam, August 15, 1965. (Spec. 4 Jack Stroud/US Army)



artillery, and the 11th Aviation Group made up of three aviation battalions (with a total of 11 aviation companies). It had approximately 15,000 personnel and approximately 450 aircraft including 126 OH-13 Sioux scout helicopters, 57 CH-47 Chinooks, four CH-54 Flying Cranes, and about 220 UH-1 Bell Iroquois (unofficially but generally known as “Hueys”). Some of the Hueys were used as troop carriers (“slicks”), some as gunships (“guns” or “hogs”), some as deliverers of Aerial Rocket Artillery, and some for removing wounded from the battlefield (“medevac”). The Cavalry Division also had six Mohawk fixed-wing reconnaissance aircraft and 18 fixed-wing CV-2B Caribou transports.

The infantry battalions of the division consisted of three rifle companies, each, when at full strength, consisting of six officers and 164 enlisted men, a combat support company of five officers and 118 enlisted men, and a battalion headquarters and headquarters company (HHC) which were together authorized 14 officers, a warrant officer, and 119 enlisted men.

The rifle companies—Alpha, Bravo, and Charlie—each had three rifle platoons and a mortar platoon of three 81mm mortar squads. Delta Company was a combat support company, which included a reconnaissance platoon, a mortar platoon, and (in theory) an anti-tank platoon normally equipped with a 90mm recoilless rifle. Given that the Americans did not expect to face enemy tanks in Vietnam, the anti-tank platoon was typically converted into a machine-gun platoon. The HHC comprised the battalion

CH-47A Chinooks and UH-1D Iroquois helicopters of the US 1st Cavalry Division pack the flight deck of USS *Boxer*, photographed after its arrival at the port of Qui Nhon. The protective Spraylat coating that covered the aircraft for the voyage has been stripped off in preparation for debarkation—the aircraft were flown to shore directly from the carrier deck. The World War II-vintage aircraft carrier transported just over half of the division's approximately 450 aircraft. (SFC James K. F. Dung/US Army)



An advance party of the US 1st Cavalry Division comes ashore at Qui Nhon. The 15,800 men of the 1st Cavalry Division required several ships for transport to Vietnam, which embarked from ports along the US Eastern Seaboard and Gulf Coast. (SSgt. Lyle V. Boggess/US Army)

commander and his staff, and communications, medical, maintenance, and supply personnel. The medical platoon included a battalion surgeon and assistant who ran the battalion aid station and supplied medics to platoons in other companies.

American rifle platoons had three rifle squads plus a weapons squad with two M60 machine guns. Most American riflemen in Vietnam in 1965 and early 1966 were armed with the M14, a selective-fire rifle derived from the M1 that preceded it, but firing the NATO standard 7.62mm cartridge. It was a heavy weapon for infantrymen to carry in the energy-sapping heat and humidity of Vietnam, and the recoil made it very difficult to control if fired on fully automatic. Before the 1st Cavalry Division left the United States, however, the authorities decided to equip it with the new M16, still not fully tested under combat conditions.

The M16 was lighter than the M14 and fired the smaller 5.56mm (.223-in.) cartridge. The lightness of the ammunition enabled more to be carried and the very moderate recoil made the M16 easier to use on fully automatic. Later in the war this weapon became very controversial. It was widely considered to be dangerously prone to jamming. Subsequent analysis revealed a number of contributing factors, but at the time of the Ia Drang fighting, the fly was not yet in the ointment, and the weapon performed as intended. In fact, Lieutenant Colonel Hal Moore (and many



The US Army began fielding its new M16 rifle to Special Forces, airborne, and airmobile troops deployed to Vietnam in 1965. The new rifle still bore the experimental designation XM16E1. (It would later be standardized as the M16A1.) Despite initial opposition by Kinnard to its adoption, the M16 performed well for soldiers of the 1st Cavalry Division, Hal Moore praising its contribution to the American success at LZ X-Ray. (US Army)

of his soldiers) attributed the survival of the 1/7 Cavalry on LZ X-Ray, at least in part, to the effectiveness of the M16.

American riflemen also normally carried a number of M26 fragmentation grenades, and rifle platoons usually had at least one M79 grenade launcher. Sometimes known as a “thump gun” from the noise it made when fired, in good hands this weapon could project a 40mm grenade accurately at ranges up to about 200m. It could also be used as a sort of heavy shotgun firing a canister round—a mode of operation useful at very short ranges. An extra weapon carried by some riflemen was the M72 66mm rocket, also called the LAW—Light Anti-tank Weapon. A lightweight, simple-to-use, one-shot weapon, it was designed to be employed against armor but was also effective against bunkers and personnel. There can be little doubt that, even if analysis is confined to the weaponry intrinsic to the infantry battalion, American firepower in the Ia Drang significantly exceeded that of the North Vietnamese.

The 1st Cavalry Division’s ground troops often benefitted from the assistance of its

New weapons for airmobile troops: a CH-47A Chinook helicopter transports an M102 howitzer by sling load. Like the M16, the CH-47 and M102—a lightened version of the standard American 105mm howitzer—were new weapons fielded by the 1st Cavalry Division during its 1965 deployment to Vietnam. (JD Coleman Collection/The Vietnam Center and Archive/Texas Tech University)



helicopter gunships and its ARA. But in general, the most constant and effective source of fire support for ground troops in contact with the enemy was the division's conventional "tube" artillery. The recently introduced M102 105mm howitzer with which the 1st Cavalry Division was equipped had a slightly longer range than its predecessor, the M101A1, but was considerably lighter, enabling it to be airlifted by a Huey. With a range of 11.5km, the M102 had a normal rate of fire of 3 rpm that could (briefly) be increased to as much as 11 rpm in an emergency. The 1st Cavalry Division's tube artillery was highly efficient and gave it a critical advantage in the major 1965 firefights with the PAVN. Artillery probably inflicted a high proportion of North Vietnamese losses in the major firefights and without it American losses would have been very much greater. Together with American airpower, it had a very damaging impact on PAVN morale.

ORDERS OF BATTLE

A large number of units of various sorts took part in the Pleiku campaign of October–November 1965 in some capacity. On the Communist side these included locally recruited ground force units that took little or no direct part in the fighting but served the PAVN as guides and gave logistical support, particularly with food supply. On the anti-Communist side they included a wide range of air units, some belonging to the (South) Vietnamese Air Force, some to the United States Air Force, some to the United States Navy and some to the United States Marine Corps. The US Air Force B-52s that took part were based as far away as Guam. The focus here, however, is on combat troops directly involved in the ground fighting.

North Vietnamese/PAVN forces

The principal force employed on the Communist side was a **Field Front** (equivalent to a small division) commanded by Brigadier General Chu Huy Man which, during this campaign, had three regiments under command: 32nd, 33rd, and 66th.

32nd (AKA 320th) Regiment (Colonel To Dinh Khanh)

In Pleiku province from early 1965, this was a "hard luck outfit" that had already endured extreme suffering: malnutrition, disease, and heavy combat casualties in engagements prior to the October–November campaign. In July, in the vicinity of the Special Forces camp at Duc Co, it had suffered a severe defeat. There is some evidence that it was already demoralized before the Plei Me operation began. Though the regiment seems to have fought hard in its attack on the ARVN ATF on October 23, in which all three of its battalions were involved, one Vietnamese Communist account attributes its failure to destroy the ATF to low morale. During its retreat it largely evaded contact with the US 1st Cavalry Division but it took a further battering at the hands of the ARVN Airborne Brigade, November 19–24. Its battalions were:

635th Battalion

344th Battalion

966th Battalion

33rd Regiment

This unit arrived in Pleiku province shortly before the campaign began. The name of its commander is never mentioned in Vietnamese Communist accounts, perhaps because he is perceived to have disgraced himself, possibly by fleeing back to the regimental base immediately after the siege of Plei Me, ahead of the bulk of his regiment. There were three infantry battalions that available accounts list simply as:

1st Battalion

2nd Battalion

3rd Battalion

All three took part in the siege of Plei Me during which they were ferociously pounded from the air. They were further battered during the retreat from Plei Me in which they undertook rear-guard actions against 1st Brigade, US 1st Cavalry Division.

66th Regiment

This also had three battalions:

7th Battalion

8th Battalion

9th Battalion

Arriving in Pleiku from the Ho Chi Minh Trail too late to take part in the Plei Me operation, they established bases on or near the Chu Pong Massif. The 9th and 7th battalions did the fighting on the Communist side at LZ X-Ray (November 14–16) while the 8th did most of the fighting at LZ Albany (November 17). Losses in these engagements were severe.

As with the 33rd Regiment, the name of the original commander of 66th Regiment is never mentioned in Vietnamese Communist accounts. He reportedly got lost at the beginning of the X-Ray firefight and was unable to take command of the regiment while that engagement lasted. Regimental command at X-Ray, in so far as it was exercised at all, devolved upon Lieutenant Colonel La Ngoc Chau, the regimental political commissar.

952nd Sapper Battalion

Some 26 members of this battalion (not integral to any of the three PAVN regiments listed above) took part in a raid on the command post/base of 3rd Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division (codenamed Stadium) at the Catecka tea plantation on the night of November 12/13.

South Vietnamese/RVNAF

The campaign took place in the II CTZ. II Corps was commanded by Major General Nguyen Phuoc Vinh Loc, who had overall responsibility for all RVNAF troops in his CTZ. But Vinh Loc did not exercise command over American units, and delegated to others tactical control of the South Vietnamese troops sent to the relief of Plei Me.

Indigenous troops defending Plei Me and at least theoretically under Vinh Loc's command included the **Plei Me Special Forces team** which had 14 personnel and the **Plei Me Strike Force** with approximately 375 (largely ethnically Jarai) personnel.

Two companies of the **91st Airborne Ranger Battalion** (with a total of about 150 personnel) commanded by Major Thut arrived at Plei Me on October 22.

24 Special Tactical Zone (Brigadier General Cao Hao Hon)

Cao Hao Hon took overall command of troops involved in the relief of Plei Me, a task given it by II Corps. In practice the execution of the relief further devolved on the Armored Task Force.

Armored Task Force (Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Trong Luat)

The kernel of the ATF was **3rd Armored Cavalry Squadron** (also commanded by Nguyen Trong Luat), which included:

2/6 Armored Personnel Carrier Troop (15 M113 APCs)

3/5 Tank Troop (16 M41 Walker Bulldog tanks)

A platoon of 222nd Artillery

A platoon of 201st Engineers

The following were added (at different times) to Luat's command:

21st Ranger Battalion

1st Battalion, 42nd Infantry Regiment

22nd Ranger Battalion

The ATF had a hard fight against the PAVN 32nd Regiment on October 23 but relieved Plei Me successfully on October 25. On October 26, however, it was surprised by a fierce counterattack by one battalion of the PAVN 33rd Regiment outside Plei Me.

ARVN Airborne Brigade (Brigadier General Du Quoc Don)

Not part of the ATF, this unit was employed at a much later stage in the campaign. The brigade employed the following battalions:

3rd Airborne Battalion

5th Airborne Battalion

6th Airborne Battalion

7th Airborne Battalion

8th Airborne Battalion

US Army forces

Military Assistance Command Vietnam (General William C. Westmoreland)
MACV took the decision to use 1st Cavalry Division in the Pleiku campaign, and made occasional interventions thereafter.

I Field Force (Major General Stanley Larsen)

Larsen had command and control (under MACV) of all American troops in the II Corps CTZ and he also made occasional interventions in the tactical conduct of the campaign.

US Army Special Forces Detachments:

A-217: Comprising approximately 12 members of the US Army Special Forces and commanded by Captain Harold H. Moore, this unit was based at Plei Me.

Project Delta: A detachment of 15 US Army Special Forces personnel commanded by Major Charles Beckwith, which normally had a special reconnaissance role, Project Delta was inserted into Plei Me, where Beckwith assumed command, on October 22.

1st Cavalry Division

The division was supposedly commanded by Major General Harry Kinnard.

Beyond lobbying for its involvement in the campaign, however, Kinnard's participation was very intermittent and limited. Actual command and control of the division in the Pleiku campaign devolved to a **1st Cavalry Division forward command post** from which Brigadier General Richard T. Knowles took command, successively, of the division's three brigades, which rotated (one at a time) through the Pleiku campaign. The division of responsibility between Knowles and the three brigade commanders who successively served under him seems to have been somewhat blurred.

1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division (Lieutenant Colonel Harlow C. Clark)

This unit included:

1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry: A unique unit, this was the 1st Cavalry Division's main reconnaissance element and played a crucial role in operations in the Ia Drang. After a spell under 1st Brigade's command, it was transferred to the control of the 1st Cavalry Division forward command post in early November.

2nd Battalion, 8th Cavalry

Company B, 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry

2nd Battalion, 12th Cavalry

1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry

2nd Battalion, 19th Artillery

Battery B, 2nd Battalion, 17th Artillery

Battery A, 2nd Battalion, 20th Artillery (Aerial Rocket Artillery)

3rd Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division (Colonel Thomas W. Brown)

This brigade normally had just two battalions:

1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry

2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry

2nd Battalion, 5th Cavalry—added for this campaign

1st Battalion, 21st Artillery—provided fire support

1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry became part of 3rd Brigade on November 15 during the firefight at LZ X-Ray, though it did not fight there.

2nd Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division (Colonel William Lynch)

2nd Brigade had four battalions under command during its participation in the last part of the Pleiku campaign:

1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry

2nd Battalion, 5th Cavalry

1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry

2nd Battalion, 12th Cavalry

None of these battalions was entirely fresh. The two 5th Cavalry battalions were transferred from 3rd Brigade. 2nd Battalion, 12th Cavalry had previously served in the Pleiku campaign with 1st Brigade, as had part of 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry. But none of these battalions was called upon to do much fighting under 2nd Brigade.

Two artillery battalions under Lynch's command were, however, employed in support of ARVN Airborne Brigade operations:

1st Battalion, 77th Artillery

2nd Battalion, 17th Artillery

OPPOSING PLANS

The PAVN's Major General Chu Huy Man and the staff of his Central Highlands Front planned the campaign in Pleiku Province that opened on October 19, 1965 and initially revolved around the Special Forces camp at Plei Me. In the early stages the South Vietnamese and the Americans merely reacted. The basics of the plan are clear enough. While the PAVN 33rd Regiment laid siege to the camp at Plei Mei, the 32nd Regiment would lie in wait for the relief column that was almost certain to be sent from the town of Pleiku, where the South Vietnamese II Corps had its headquarters, and would destroy it in a type of operation that the PAVN characterized as a "maneuver ambush."

Nguyen Huu An (fourth from left) and command staff at a field exercise. (Socialist Republic of Vietnam)

This sort of "lure and ambush" scheme was entirely typical of Vietnamese Communist war making. The PAVN had tried something very similar in Pleiku just the previous July, before Man took over. The



32nd Regiment had then laid siege to the CIDG/Special Forces camp at Duc Co and had sustained severe casualties ambushing (but failing to destroy) the relief force. It had been forced to break off the siege. Having suffered defeat in addition to long-term problems of malnutrition and disease, the 32nd's morale had plummeted. Chu Huy Man apparently expected better results with Plei Me because there was a larger PAVN force available, and because he intended to spring the ambush on a narrower road where there would be less room for the enemy to maneuver.

Man's main intent in the short run was the destruction of the column that he expected the South Vietnamese to send to Plei Me's relief. He probably expected this to comprise virtually the last mobile and battle-worthy troops available to the South Vietnamese II Corps. With those forces destroyed or at least crippled, the North Vietnamese could then overrun Plei Me and might proceed to make themselves masters of Pleiku Province.

Some Vietnamese Communist histories also indicate that it was a crucial part of Man's plan to draw the US 1st Cavalry Division into the mountains and jungles of the Central Highlands and to gauge its strengths and weaknesses by engaging it in combat. This may well be a rationalization after the fact. No convincing contemporary evidence has been produced that, in September/October 1965, Man was seeking battle with the US 1st Cavalry Division. Equally unsubstantiated is Harry Kinnard's claim that, by its efforts in the Pleiku/Ia Drang campaign, his 1st Cavalry Division thwarted a Communist plan to cut South Vietnam in half. Both sides were aware of the long-term possibility that, if the Communists gained control of the Central Highlands or a substantial part thereof, they might eventually proceed to bisect the southern republic. The PAVN, however, lacked the strength to do this in 1965 and there is no evidence that General Man had any immediate intention of attempting it.

Immediately after the siege began, on October 19, South Vietnamese II Corps commander Vinh Loc acknowledged the need to relieve Plei Me. But he seems to have suspected that the principal purpose of the Communists was to destroy his reserves, possibly as a preliminary to an attack on the town of Pleiku and on his own headquarters within it. Vinh Loc's insistence on securing his base and retaining some sort of reserve played a vital role in drawing the US 1st Cavalry Division into the campaign.



South Vietnamese troops, led by American advisor Norman Schwarzkopf, are pictured following operations to clear Highway 19 west of the city of Pleiku in August 1965. Highway 19 was the east-west corridor linking the interior of Pleiku Province to the coast written about in Bernard Fall's classic book, *Street without Joy*. As a favored place of Communist ambush since French colonial days, this route inspired a certain amount of caution in those traveling it. (Bettmann/Getty Images)

THE CAMPAIGN

PAVN PREPARATIONS FOR THE PLEIKU CAMPAIGN, SEPTEMBER–OCTOBER 1965

Of the PAVN regiments that fought in Pleiku in October–November 1965, the only one in that province when the planning process commenced in mid-September was the 32nd Regiment. At that time its headquarters was at Plei Lao Chin, just to the north of the River Drang and about 2km east of the Cambodian border. The first elements of 33rd Regiment arrived in Pleiku on September 10, but most of the rest of the regiment did not complete its journey down the Ho Chi Minh Trail until early October. Upon arrival it took up residence in a base area around a Highland village that the PAVN called Anta, also in the valley of the Ia Drang and close to the Cambodian border, at the foot of the Chu Pong Massif. The 33rd almost certainly arrived weary and malnourished, and needed time for rest and recuperation. The time available for actual battle preparation was just ten days. The 33rd Regiment's commander (whose name has not come down to us) apparently considered this inadequate and protested, but he was overruled.

The 32nd Regiment had begun detailed planning and preparation for its part in the operation—the ambush of the relief column—as early as September 19, a month ahead of the start of the campaign. The ambush was to be mounted on Provincial Route 5: a one-lane dirt road, but the only one available between the town of Pleiku, the location of the headquarters of ARVN II Corps, and the camp at Plei Me. The intended ambush site was about 4km long and located about 30km south of the town of Pleiku and 10km north of Plei Me camp. The ambush site was minutely reconnoitered and the approaches and surrounding terrain carefully explored. These areas were reproduced on sand tables and exercises and rehearsals were carried out. Food and ammunition were stockpiled where they would be required.

On October 10, the 32nd Regiment began moving toward its assembly area for the operation, 2–3km west of the road on which the ambush was to be conducted. By October 17, its assembly was complete. The regiment then constructed robust, carefully camouflaged bunkers where it would wait for Plei Me's relief force to approach. A lookout and communications system was organized to keep commanders informed of the approach of the enemy column. Until battle was joined radio silence would be maintained, communication relying on runners and field telephones. The intention,

when the enemy column arrived in the killing zone, was to conduct a “maneuver ambush.” A series of assaults would cut the road both in front of and behind the ARVN column, break the column into fragments, and then destroy it piecemeal.

Soon after its arrival in Pleiku Province, Man’s headquarters told the PAVN 33rd Regiment that its mission was to attack a fortified camp. But most of its personnel were not given the name or location of the objective until October 15, when it commenced its move into positions near Plei Me. Only the regimental commander and his staff, the regimental reconnaissance element, and the battalion commanders knew the target earlier than that. Between October 15 and 19 the 33rd Regiment constructed the positions from which it would conduct its assaults and made its final battle preparations. Its positions formed an arc around the western side of the camp. Once the operation began, the 33rd Regiment’s fire would make access to Plei Me by helicopter or on foot hazardous. But at no stage did the PAVN completely surround the camp.



Plei Me defenders look on as a US air strike hits PAVN positions beyond the wire. (Bettmann/Getty Images)

THE SIEGE AND RELIEF OF PLEI ME, OCTOBER 19–25, 1965

The camp at Plei Me was roughly an equilateral triangle lying in a sparsely forested and generally level area. It had two belts of barbed-wire fencing within which there were two concentric triangular trench systems. At each of the three corners there was a big bunker containing a 0.5-in. machine gun. The camp had at least two 81mm mortars and a 4.2-in. mortar. Immediately south of the camp there was an airstrip capable of handling C-123 Provider transport aircraft, and there was a helipad on its eastern side. Plei Me had two main outposts, one of them 1km northeast and the other 2km south of the main camp. Each of these was normally garrisoned by 20 soldiers. It was also normal practice to have five smaller pickets or ambush patrols, each of eight men, outside the wire at night.



Parachuted supplies land inside the beleaguered camp. Airdrops and close air support were vital to its survival. (Joseph L. Galloway)



TRẠI PLEIME

ĐÓN MỪNG QUÂN KHÁCH





PLEI ME CAMP (PP. 34–35)

In the days before the siege, US Army Special Forces soldiers (1) pause at the main gate of the Plei Me camp on their way back from the helipad to entertain the son (2) of a member of the garrison who is seeing his family off as they return to their nearby home. The Plei Me camp was part of the CIDG program. The US Central Intelligence Agency had initiated this program in 1961 to prevent the Central Highlands falling under Communist control. The program initially focused on helping villages belonging to Highland ethnic groups to protect themselves against Communist penetration and takeover. During 1962–63, however, the US Army took control of the program from the CIA. The emphasis shifted from defending Highland villages to establishing mini

forts from which patrols could monitor and intercept Communist infiltrators. By 1965 forts like that at Plei Me were scattered over much of the Central Highlands. Plei Me's garrison consisted of CIDG troops belonging to the Jarai ethnic group and US and South Vietnamese Special Forces teams. Some Jarai women (3) and children were commonly present in the camp too. Women cooked food and did laundry there in normal times. During the siege they also assisted in nursing the wounded.

The North Vietnamese initiated their 1965 campaign in Pleiku Province by laying siege to Plei Me. But destroying the camp was only a secondary objective. The main purpose was to lure in and annihilate South Vietnamese reserves.

Plei Me's garrison consisted of some 12 USASF and 14 VNSF personnel, and 415 CIDG troops—the great majority of the latter belonging to the Jarai ethnic group. On the night of October 19, a combat patrol from Plei Me consisting of two members of the USASF “A-Team” (A-217) and 85 CIDG personnel was on a mission 15km northwest of the camp. A total of 40 CIDG soldiers held the camp's two main outposts and another 40 manned pickets or ambushes. That left 10–12 USASF (accounts differ), 14 VNSF, and about 250 CIDG personnel inside the camp when the siege began.

The camp began taking small-arms fire from the southwest at 1915 on October 19. At 2200 the outpost to the south was attacked and within 20 minutes overrun. Also at 2200, the main camp started taking mortar and recoilless rifle fire. The PAVN 33rd Regiment launched an attack on the main camp at 0030 on Wednesday October 20, the main thrusts coming from the north and northwest. Over the next 40 minutes the North Vietnamese attacked from a bewildering number of directions. By 0110 they were “within the defensive wire barriers to the south, on the east near the main gate and to the north near the corner bunker,” according to the after-action report. But the camp did not fall and the attackers pulled back.

The camp's Vietnamese commander allegedly disappeared into a deep bunker when the attacks began and was not seen above ground again during the siege. Captain Harold H. Moore of the USASF took effective control. Moore summoned air support as soon as the first attacks began. Flares were dropping around the camp from aircraft by 0215 on October 20 and the

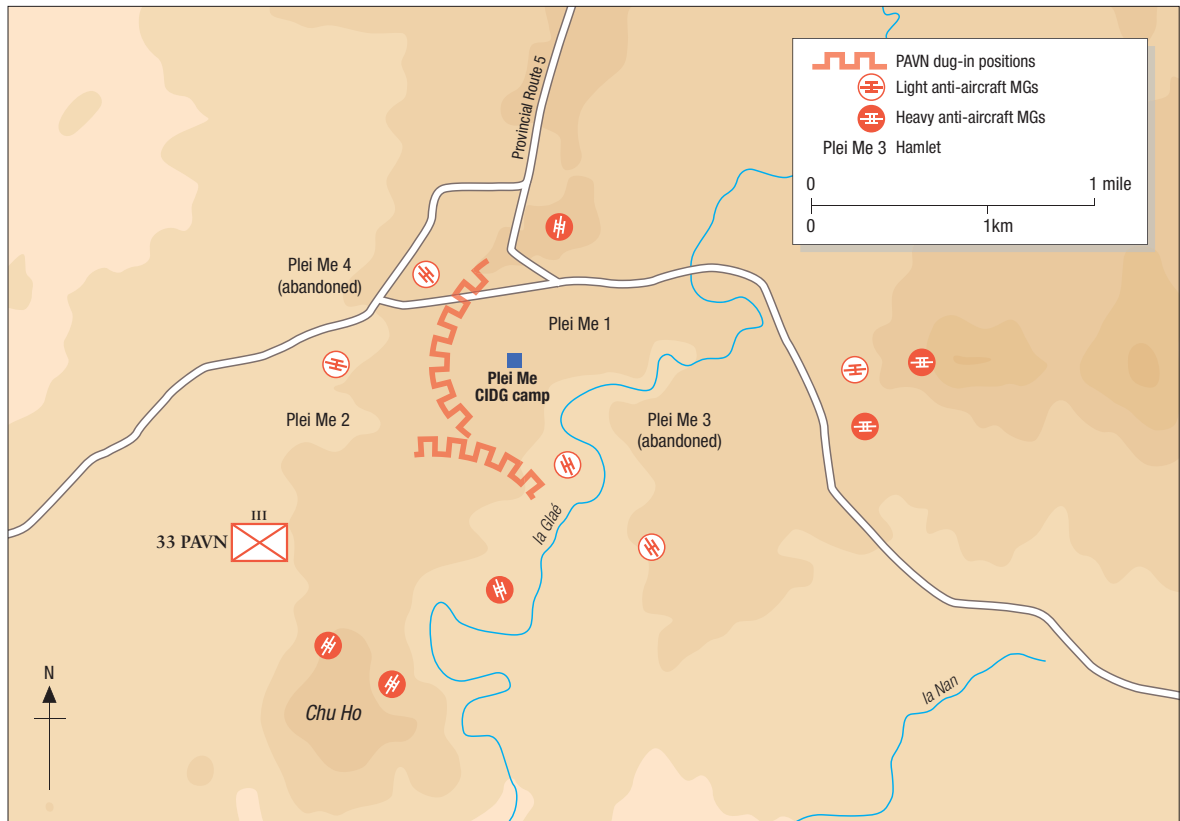


Major Charles Beckwith arrived at Plei Me CIDG camp with reinforcements the morning of October 22. With him were two companies of ARVN Airborne Rangers and 15 members of US Army Special Forces Project Delta. Pictured: Project Delta troops mark their position with smoke during a sweep near Plei Me camp. (Kyoichi Sawada/Bettman/Getty Images)



ARVN Airborne Rangers, sent as reinforcements, defend Plei Me camp from PAVN attacks. (Ullsteinbild/TopFoto)

PAVN siege positions around Plei Me CIDG camp, October 20, 1965



first air strike had been delivered by 0410. For the rest of the siege the camp would enjoy massive air support. The PAVN 33rd Regiment would take a terrible pounding and suffer severe casualties.

The after-action report states that the patrol that had been operating to the northeast on the night of October 19/20 re-entered the camp in darkness at 2130 on October 20 “without encountering any major action,” adding over 80 combatants to the defense. Additional reinforcements soon arrived. Two companies of South Vietnamese Rangers and 15 American Project Delta personnel were helicoptered to a spot about 5km north of the camp, arriving by 1030 on October 21. After some misadventures, these reinforcements ran into the camp through the main gate at 0900 on October 22. The senior Project Delta officer present, Major Charles Beckwith, then took command at Plei Me. He sensibly requested and successfully received resupply of food, water, and ammunition by parachute drop. But he also mounted a series of ill-advised daylight sorties that cost the garrison some bloody losses for no significant gain.

The sending of a relief column took longer, partly because Vinh Loc, the II Corps commander, was reluctant to commit all his combat-effective reserves in response to what he correctly supposed to be a Communist plan to ambush and destroy them. The Americans were, however, anxious to relieve Plei Me quickly and wanted Vinh Loc to assemble a relief force too strong to be crushed in any ambush. In an effort to reassure the II Corps commander,

they offered elements of the 1st Cavalry Division to protect his base in the town of Pleiku. By October 23, when it began to advance toward Plei Me, the relief force included 3rd Armored Cavalry Squadron (with 16 M41 Walker Bulldog tanks, 15 M113 armored personnel carriers—APCs, a platoon of artillery, a platoon of engineers, some supply vehicles, and some M8 armored cars), 21st and 22nd Ranger battalions, and 1st Battalion, 42nd Infantry Regiment (ARVN). The 22nd

Ranger Battalion initially operated separately, but the rest of these troops formed an ATF under Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Trong Luat.

Luat was quite certain that he was advancing to ambush. He moved slowly and cautiously. But a misunderstanding led to the supply train of the ATF lagging behind. It became separated from the main body as the ATF proceeded into the killing zone of the PAVN 32nd Regiment's ambush soon after 1700 on October 23. The main body survived the ensuing Communist onslaught with relatively modest casualties, losing none of its tanks or APCs. But the train, defended by elements of 21st Rangers and some M8 armored cars, was soon surrounded and badly mauled. Without American close air support it might have been destroyed completely. This battle, much of it fought at night, cost the South Vietnamese about 50 killed, 102 wounded, and 19 missing. But North Vietnamese losses were probably much greater.

The defeated PAVN 32nd Regiment began retreating toward its base near the Cambodian border on the morning of October 24, though neither



American Special Forces soldiers during the siege of Plei Me. (Joseph L. Galloway)



South Vietnamese troops in action against PAVN rearguard skirmishers outside Plei Me on October 27. By this date, the siege had been lifted and ARVN and US forces were in pursuit of the retreating PAVN attackers. (Kyoichi Sawada/UPI/Bettmann/Getty Images)



Highlander families watch as UH-1D helicopters arrive at Plei Me camp on November 1. (AFP/Getty Images)

the South Vietnamese nor the Americans knew this at the time. Luat infuriated some Americans by pausing on October 24 to reorganize, resupply, and recuperate. He also demanded more artillery support before continuing the operation. The US 1st Cavalry Division helicoptered guns forward, the advance resumed, and before nightfall on October 25 the ATF had relieved Plei Me.

The following day, October 26, while the ATF was making a circuit of the camp to check

that the besiegers had gone, 3rd Battalion of the PAVN 33rd Regiment, left behind as a rearguard, struck the ATF in a perfectly timed surprise attack. It cost the ATF 27 fatal casualties and 80 wounded. But it was just a hit and run operation. In its aftermath the 3rd Battalion joined the PAVN 33rd Regiment's retreat while the ATF soon returned to Pleiku.

INITIATING THE PURSUIT, OCTOBER 27–30, 1965

A major Communist plan had been frustrated and a considerable defensive victory for the anti-Communist side had been won. But the Pleiku campaign was far from over. The continuation of some fairly high-intensity fighting in this province well into November was, at least in part, owing to the ambitions of Harry Kinnard and his wish to demonstrate the potency of the airmobile concept.

It was a frequent American criticism of the South Vietnamese that they failed to follow up defensive successes by the vigorous pursuit of enemy forces. A commonplace of Western military thought was that a defeated and retreating enemy should be given no chance to recover. He should be relentlessly pursued, if possible annihilated. Kinnard believed that his division was the ideal instrument to chase and destroy Communist forces retreating from the recent siege and ambush operations in Pleiku. He lobbied William Westmoreland to be given this mission. By October 27, at the latest, Westmoreland had acceded to Kinnard's request.

The 1st Cavalry Division did not have enough helicopters to make the whole division fully airmobile at any given time. The mission was given to a single

The Camp Radcliff airfield at An Khe is seen early in its construction. Nicknamed "the Golf Course," it would become the hub for the 1st Cavalry Division's air fleet during the campaign. (US Army)



brigade, Lieutenant Colonel Harlow Clark's 1st Brigade. The problem was that Clark's Brigade had very little hard intelligence on the Communist forces that had been involved in the siege and ambush operations in the vicinity of Plei Me. At this stage the Americans did not know which units were involved, where they were based, or in which direction they might have moved. Neither Clark's Brigade headquarters nor the 1st Cavalry Division headquarters seems to have sought intelligence on these matters from II Corps. The 1st Cavalry Division seems to have wanted to operate completely without reference to II Corps and, indeed, seems to have had a degree of contempt even for American personnel working within that organization. Instead, the Cavalry relied entirely on its own resources to find the enemy. That meant days of ill-directed, frenetic, and, for the most part, totally ineffective helicopter activity. The result was the consumption of prodigious quantities of aviation fuel, massive mechanical wear and tear on the helicopters, and, within a few days of the start of the pursuit, a logistical crisis.

For the campaign in Pleiku, Harlow Clark had under his command the 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry Regiment (1/9 Cavalry called, in Cavalry parlance, "the First of the Ninth"), 2nd Battalion, 8th Cavalry (2/8), 2nd Battalion, 12th Cavalry (2/12), and 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry (1/12), the last of which was added to 1st Brigade only on October 28. Fire support was available from the 105mm howitzers of the 17th and 19th Artillery and the ARA of Battery A, 2nd Battalion, 20th Artillery. With the exception of the 1/9 and the ARA, these units did not have their own helicopters. Troop transport was provided by two lift companies of the 227th Assault Helicopter Battalion, each company consisting of four platoons each having four Model D Bell Iroquois UH-1D helicopters known as "slicks." Also available to 1st Brigade was a company of Huey UH-1B gunships that escorted the troop-carrying slicks in an assault. Clark's 1st Brigade was also allocated a company of medium-lift Chinook helicopters to increase its transport capacity.

On October 28 1st Brigade moved its headquarters from a remote location called LZ Homecoming (accessible only by a dirt road and a very small airfield) to a base codenamed Stadium—the French-run Catecka tea plantation. Catecka was only 15km from Pleiku and was accessible by an all-weather road and by an airfield into which CV-2B Caribou and C-123 Provider transport could be flown. There were other amenities too. The plantation house reportedly had an outdoor swimming pool around which bikini-clad French ladies could sometimes be observed.



Camp Holloway, located outside the town of Pleiku, served as a forward logistical base for the 1st Cavalry Division. Stacks of ammunition and C-rations are seen stockpiled near the loading area of the base's airstrip. (Allan K. Holm/US Army)

The US policy of "winning hearts and minds" was well established even at this early stage of the war. In this photo, Cavalry troopers distribute medicine to inhabitants of Pleiku Province. (SFC Jack H. Yamaguchi/US Army)





At the same time American troops were seeking the goodwill of the populace, their role as an occupying force inevitably led to resentment, particularly given Indochina's long and troubled history of foreign interventions. Here, 1st Cavalry troopers search for contraband in the countryside around An Khe, October 16, 1965. (SFC Jack H. Yamaguchi/US Army)

There was, however, a significant downside to using Catecka as a headquarters. It was rumored that some of the plantation workers were Communist agents and that the management paid protection money to allow its product to be grown and transported to the coast without interference. It is practically certain that American activity at Catecka was closely observed and the intelligence made available to the Communist chain of command. The risks of using this location were not, however, made fully apparent until 3rd Brigade took it over as its headquarters later in the campaign.

The most mobile unit available and the one best trained for what was essentially a reconnaissance task was 1/9 Cavalry commanded by Lieutenant Colonel John Stockton. Stockton's squadron consisted of three air cavalry troops. Each was capable of operating independently. In the early days of the search individual troops were looking west, south, and east of Plei Me. Each troop was divided into a scout (White) team, a gunship (Red) team, and a rifle platoon (Blue) team. White teams flew light Sioux OH-13 helicopters the open "bubble" cockpits of which were designed to provide excellent observation. They flew just above the trees and investigated clearing and trails. If they attracted fire, Red team UH-1B gunships hovering higher up would come down and deliver rockets and machine-gun fire. If there seemed to be a significant number of North Vietnamese stragglers in the area, the Blue team—the aerial rifle platoon—would land from Huey "slicks" and conduct a ground search. Sometimes they established a patrol base from which they would conduct night ambush patrols.

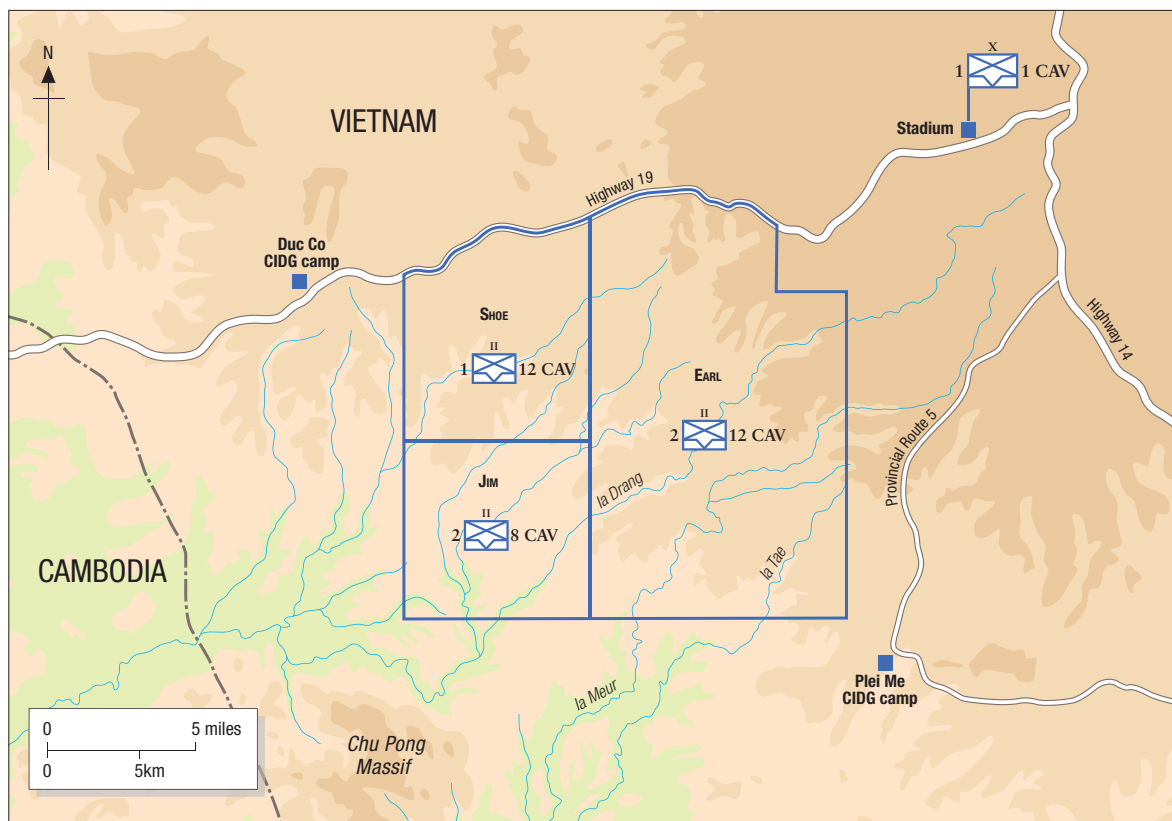
1st Brigade did not rely on 1/9 alone to find the retreating enemy. In practice the whole brigade was engaged in this mission. As the 1st Division's after-action report explained:

[The] concept was to conduct an intensive search for the enemy, looking everywhere—in the villages, in the jungles and along the stream beds. By widespread dispersion, made possible by excellent communications and helicopter lift, the Brigade was to sweep large areas systematically. Each battalion was to be deployed with supporting artillery ... Here was air mobility's acid test. The next few days [from 27 October] would reveal whether years of planning and testing would bear the fruits of victory—for a concept and a division.

The results of this "acid test" would prove to be far more mixed than the 1st Cavalry Division's after-action report cared to admit.

1st Brigade's staff allocated each of its three conventional infantry-type battalions a sector to search. The sectors were codenamed Earl, Shoe, and Jim. The battalions arranged for their companies to be

Battalion areas of operation, 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, October 29–November 2, 1965



inserted by helicopter into particular subsectors. Once a company left its helicopters it would, of course, be expected to search on foot. But in 1965, 1st Cavalry Division troops were inadequately trained and poorly equipped for lengthy jungle patrols. The 1st Cavalry Division went to war in heavyweight sateen uniforms rather than the lightweight poplin jungle fatigues issued later in the war. Its troops also lacked the larger “tropical” rucksacks that would appear later in the war, allowing American troops to carry several days’ supplies. During 1st Brigade’s search operations, therefore, infantry companies normally set up night positions in the late afternoon and waited to be supplied by a “log bird”—a helicopter that would bring in hot food and sometimes extra ammunition and even mail before dark. Even members of the division later admitted that this was “hideously wasteful of helicopter assets,” but Kinnard justified the practice as necessary to sustain the morale and efficiency of the division’s ground troops.

Inefficiency in the use of helicopters did not end there. Because the infantry was, by helicopter, shifting quite big distances quite frequently, the artillery also made frequent moves in order to be in position to render effective fire support. The numerous small, constantly shifting firebases could rarely be given more than a company’s worth of infantry protection but the Cavalry Division philosophy at this time was that shifting the artillery every 48 hours



A 1st Cavalry Division CH-54 Tarhe picks up a load of 500-gallon “blivits”—collapsible fuel bladders used to transport the JP-4 jet fuel needed to sustain airmobile operations. The high demand imposed on the division’s limited logistical resources in October “almost ended the Pleiku campaign before it began,” according to historian John M. Carland. The situation only improved after the US Air Force agreed to divert its own stocks of fuel to sustain 1st Cavalry operations. (J. D. Coleman Collection/The Vietnam Center and Archive/Texas Tech University)

or so would keep it safe. It would take the enemy longer than that to concentrate sufficient forces for an attack on a firebase. But this way of doing things just added to 1st Brigade’s prodigious consumption of aviation fuel and to the extraordinary amount of mechanical wear and tear on the helicopters.

For the first few days all this frenetic activity appeared to achieve practically nothing. The Americans found traces of the PAVN 32nd Regiment’s retreat. But they found them in places that the North Vietnamese had passed through days earlier. The

32nd Regiment would complete its retreat to its base in the Ia Drang Valley with only the most fleeting contact with the US 1st Cavalry Division. The 33rd Regiment, on the other hand, had started its retreat later than the 32nd. Its troops should have been easier to intercept. Some of them eventually were intercepted. But in the early days of the search the focus of the Cavalry was too far north.

Though 1/9 Cavalry reported that it had seen and engaged a few enemy troops from the air, for the first few days the bulk of 1st Brigade had made no contact at all. On October 29, for the third day running, Clark’s men captured not a single PAVN soldier or weapon. The PAVN killed and wounded were recorded as “unknown.” The 1st Cavalry Division’s campaign in Pleiku, of which Kinnard had expected so much, seemed to be in danger of turning into something of a farce. Making matters worse, the Cavalry’s extravagant style of operations in this remote part of the country had already caused a logistical crisis which had implications for the entire American war effort in Vietnam.

The logistical hub of 1st Cavalry Brigade operations in Pleiku Province was the airfield at Camp Holloway on the outskirts of the town of Pleiku and the nearby refueling center called the Turkey Farm. The Turkey Farm was the location for the 500-gallon bladders that held the JP-4 and Avgas aviation fuels that powered the division’s helicopters. The 1st Cavalry Division was responsible for distributing fuel to its aircraft from Camp Holloway and the Turkey Farm, but getting the fuel as far as Camp Holloway was the responsibility of the US Army’s logistical command. A major problem for the logisticians was that traffic on Highway 19 (the road to the town of Pleiku from the coastal city of Qui Nhon) was very likely to be ambushed. Air transport was the only reliable way of getting supplies to this part of the Central Highlands.

The 17th Aviation Company, equipped with Caribou fixed-wing transport aircraft, was flying aviation fuel from Qui Nhon to the Turkey Farm for the Cavalry’s use, but not enough was arriving to sustain 1st Brigade at its current tempo of operations. On October 27 Kinnard asked the Air Force for help but there was no immediate response. The following evening, Larsen’s Field

Force headquarters told MACV that the fuel situation in the Highlands was “critical.” Over the next day or two, possibly at Westmoreland’s personal insistence, the US Air Force shifted the delivery of JP-4 to this part of the Central Highlands to the top of its list of priorities and the 1st Cavalry Division was able to continue the Pleiku campaign.

Up to this point the campaign’s results had been disappointing. Clark, despite being of relatively junior rank to be directing operations of such importance, had made no obvious blunders. In the immediate aftermath of the logistical crisis, he nevertheless found his independence considerably reduced. From this point onward, Kinnard’s deputy, Dick Knowles, increasingly took control of the campaign from a division forward headquarters in the town of Pleiku.

THE HOSPITAL FIREFIGHT, NOVEMBER 1, 1965

It is difficult to attribute it to any particular decision taken or direction given by Knowles, but his assumption of a greater degree of control more or less coincided with a change in the Cavalry’s fortunes. There were some fleeting contacts with the North Vietnamese on October 29 and 30, but it was on November 1 that the Cavalry’s efforts in Pleiku finally began to bear some real fruit. At about 0720 that morning, scout helicopters belonging to Major Robert Zion’s B Troop, 1/9 Cavalry, flying from a base at Plei Do Rim, near the Catecka tea plantation, spotted around a dozen PAVN soldiers at a location about halfway between Plei Me and the base to which they were retreating at the foot of the Chu Pong Massif.

We now know (as the Americans who encountered them that morning did not) that these PAVN troops belonged to 1st Battalion, 33rd Regiment. They had been ordered to retreat from Plei Me about a week earlier. But they were still only about 12km west (and slightly south) of Plei Me. Their battalion had reportedly suffered about 40 percent casualties in the siege of Plei Me—most of them almost certainly the result of air strikes. Their retreat had been hampered by further interference from the air and by the need to carry many severely wounded men. For a few days the surviving elements of the battalion had paused at and around a well-concealed regimental aid post on a stream that was a tributary of the River Tae flowing south and west toward Cambodia.

The action that follows can quickly be summarized. The North Vietnamese that 1/9 Cavalry spotted on the morning of November 1 were immediately south of the PAVN regimental aid station. B Troop’s scouts and gunships opened fire on them and summoned the troop’s aerial rifle platoon. This 30-strong

An OH-13S Sioux scout helicopter of A Troop, 1/9 Cavalry lifts off on a reconnaissance mission. In the first week following defeat at Plei Me, retreating North Vietnamese troops had proven an elusive quarry in what UPI reporter Joe Galloway called a “game of foxes and hounds.” (J. D. Coleman Collection/The Vietnam Center and Archive/Texas Tech University)





The capture of enemy documents, food, medicines, heavy weapons, and some 44 prisoners at a PAVN regimental field hospital on November 1 marked the 1st Cavalry's earliest important success in the campaign. Despite privation and a string of setbacks, the North Vietnamese troops retreating from Plei Me were still full of fight, as evidenced by this prisoner held at gunpoint. (AP/Shutterstock)

force landed at 0808 and, guided by the scout helicopters, advanced to the last reported positions of the PAVN troops. They soon clashed with a small group of North Vietnamese, killing five and capturing four before pushing on to overrun the aid station and with it a substantial quantity of drugs and other medical supplies. By 0955 B Troop had killed another 15 North Vietnamese and captured a further 15 in and immediately around the aid station. B Troop realized that the aid station was important and, anxious to secure it, requested both reinforcements and helicopters to remove prisoners and captured stores. 1/9's two other aerial rifle platoons arrived to

reinforce B Troop's. John Stockton, the squadron commander, had personally arrived at the aid station by early afternoon.

At 1410 scout helicopters reported a substantial PAVN force moving toward the aid station from the northeast. Though engaged from the air with machine guns and rockets by scout helicopters and gunships, they kept coming. From 1420 until about 1800 a North Vietnamese force estimated at 100–200 kept the three aerial rifle platoons continuously engaged. The Cavalry reinforced 1/9 with infantry platoons from all three of 1st Brigade's infantry battalions. Because the LZ that 1/9's aerial rifle platoons had used was under fire, another LZ about a kilometer further south was used to fly in later reinforcements.

The Cavalry sustained 11 dead and 47 wounded in this firefight but had almost certainly inflicted substantially heavier losses on the North Vietnamese. It claimed to have killed 98 PAVN soldiers and taken 44 prisoners. In addition to medical supplies (of which the North Vietnamese were desperately short) it had captured 300lb of rice, three 75mm recoilless rifles, an 82mm mortar, and 37 personal weapons as well as grenades, Bangalore torpedoes, and ammunition. A captured map revealed enemy supply and march routes and these led to further interdiction bombing by the US Air Force.

At the time of the hospital firefight, 1/9 Cavalry was still under the control of Clark's 1st Brigade. On November 2, however, as most of 1/9 returned to its base, Knowles' forward headquarters at Pleiku assumed command of it. On the same day, 2/12 Cavalry took charge of the situation around the PAVN aid station. Searching the area, this battalion found another 29 large containers of medical supplies and had a couple of clashes with small groups of PAVN troops, capturing six of them. After days of prodigious, frenetic, logistically very expensive military activity for practically no useful result, the results of the engagement on November 1 came as something of a relief for Kinnard, Knowles, Clark, and their staffs. Yet it was nowhere near enough to prove the revolutionary potential of the 1st Cavalry Division or to justify the enormous strain that its Pleiku campaign was imposing on the American logistical system in Vietnam. Knowles and Clark were under pressure to achieve much more.

THE IA DRANG AMBUSH AND LZ MARY, NOVEMBER 3–4, 1965

Maps captured at the PAVN aid station on November 1 suggested that the 33rd Regiment was retreating toward the Cambodian border at the point at which the River Drang crossed it. Knowles wanted to find and engage the North Vietnamese in that area. On November 3, 1/9 Cavalry shifted its base of operations to the Duc Co CIDG camp from which it was meant to work in conjunction with a CIDG Eagle Flight (airmobile unit) and Alpha Company of 1/8 Cavalry.

Leaving A Company of 1/8 Cavalry at Duc Co as a reserve, at 1530 on November 3 B Troop of 1/9, together with the rifle platoon of the other two troops and the CIDG Eagle Flight, landed at a small clearing just south of the Drang. The clearing, pre-selected during a personal reconnaissance by John Stockton earlier in the day, was just large enough to take five helicopters. Designated LZ Mary, it became the patrol base for that evening's operations.

While some troops stayed back to hold LZ Mary, others established three platoon-sized ambush positions. The Highland troops of the Eagle Flight mounted the ambush furthest to the west. 1/9 troops manned the other two. It was the southernmost ambush, commanded by Captain Knowlen of C Troop, 1/9 that achieved some success. But the circumstances of the ambush were somewhat bizarre from the point of view of the ambushers themselves, who soon realized that they were in real danger.

The Americans were hoping to ambush members of the PAVN regiment that had been severely hammered from the air during the siege of Plei Me and which they (incorrectly) believed were trying to retreat across the Cambodian border. The Americans expected their intended victims to be moving east-west. But the North Vietnamese approaching the American killing zone were moving west-east. They did not have the dejected appearance of troops retreating after a failed operation in which they had been badly bludgeoned and burned by American airpower. Instead they exhibited a certain naivety and overconfidence. They were moving somewhat carelessly and talking too loudly, as if they were not yet in a combat zone. It was also obvious to Knowlen that they greatly outnumbered his patrol. Indeed, they outnumbered it so heavily that he would have been justified in not springing the ambush.

Knowlen, however, knew that his superiors had become intensely frustrated by the limited success of the Cavalry Division's search and pursuit operations. They were now desperate for contact with the enemy almost regardless of the risk involved. At 2110, having allowed part of the North Vietnamese column to pass through the killing zone unmolested, he initiated the ambush. The Americans fired eight Claymore directional mines set along a 100m kill zone and blazed away with their M16s for two minutes. There was

Cargo pods (also called "people pods"), designed for the ferrying of cargo or troops by the CH-54 heavy lift helicopter, were often pressed into more pedestrian uses, as was the pod below. The 1st Cavalry Division used one such pod as its forward tactical operations center in the town of Pleiku. (PFC K. Corrigan/US Army)





UH-1B helicopters were pressed into duty as gunships by the 1st Cavalry after the loss of its OV-1 Mohawk battalion in a political tussle with the Air Force. Here a crew member of the 227th Assault Helicopter Battalion arms the weapons system on his UH-1B gunship before a mission. (J. D. Coleman Collection/The Vietnam Center and Archive/Texas Tech University)

just arriving in South Vietnam from the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The battalion was heading for a base area that included the Chu Pong Massif and adjacent parts of the Ia Drang Valley. Its personnel had evidently believed that the area through which they were marching was secure. Indeed, the other side's forces had hitherto hardly ever ventured into it. The North Vietnamese were now angry and vengeful. Knowlen realized that he had stamped on a tiger's tail and that the tiger would soon come after his patrol.

Knowlen made Major Robert Zion, in command at LZ Mary, aware of the situation and Zion decided to withdraw the other 1/9 ambush patrol to LZ Mary immediately. But he left the Eagle Flight patrol where it was for the time being. Because the Eagle Flight personnel wore uniforms and spoke languages different from those of the Americans, Zion apparently feared a "friendly fire" incident if they were recalled to LZ Mary at this point.

It did not take the North Vietnamese long to identify the American patrol base and to start attacking it. The first assault, which the Americans estimated to involve two or three PAVN companies, struck the American defensive perimeter at LZ Mary at approximately 2230. By midnight the LZ had been subjected to repeated assaults and was in grave danger of being overrun. But a combination of the use of aerial rocket artillery within 50m of their perimeter and the arrival of a company of reinforcements sent in by Stockton, commander of 1/9 Cavalry, turned the balance in favor of the Americans. By dawn assaults had ceased and LZ Mary was receiving only desultory fire. After making a search of the area and finding nothing, the Americans were able to retire in good order. They had suffered four killed and 15 wounded. PAVN casualties were almost certainly higher but could not be confirmed because they were carried away. Their one North Vietnamese prisoner informed the Americans of a fresh PAVN regiment, the 66th, in the Drang Valley.

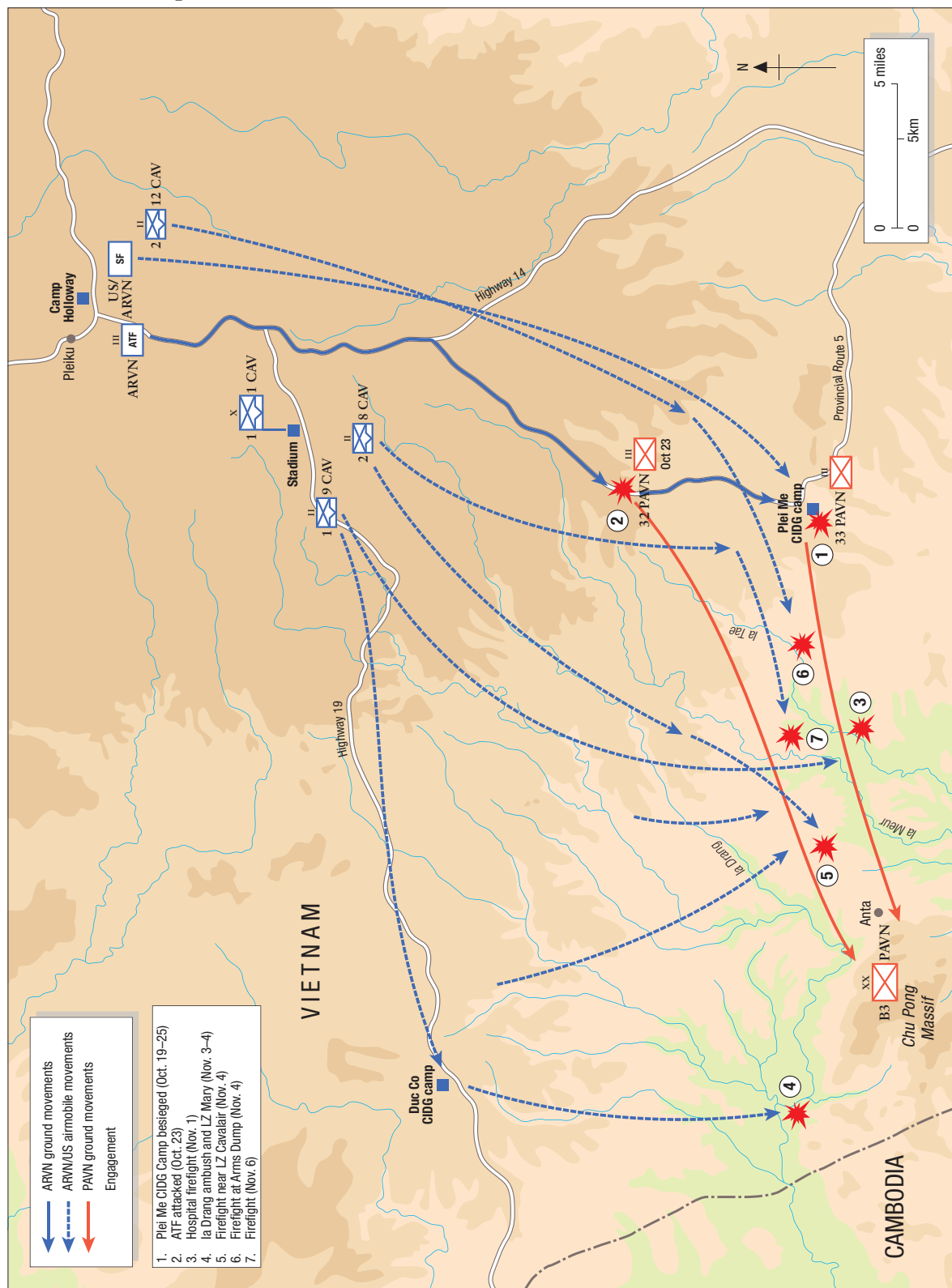
no return fire. Given the precariousness of his situation, Knowlen decided to forgo the normal practice of "policing-up" the ambush site (capturing weapons and looking for documents that might be useful for intelligence purposes). Instead he ordered his men to move immediately to a planned post-ambush rendezvous. From there they moved briskly to the patrol base at LZ Mary. Mortars based at LZ Mary, meanwhile, fired on the trail on which the ambush had just been sprung.

Knowlen's ambush had struck part of the PAVN 8th Battalion, 66th Regiment,

THE LAST DAYS OF 1ST BRIGADE, NOVEMBER 4–12, 1965

There were another three firefights between troops of 1st Brigade, US 1st Cavalry Division and the North Vietnamese over the next few days: two on November 4, and one on November 6.

Plei Me and the pursuit, October 19–November 6



On the morning of November 4, a platoon of 2/8 Cavalry was patrolling from a recently established LZ and firebase called LZ Cavalair just 4km northeast of the North Vietnamese base at Anta village. About 800m north of Cavalair, the patrol ran into a PAVN force estimated to be two companies strong. The Americans called for reinforcements. Artillery and close air support were initially difficult to use. The PAVN infantry were too close to, and in some places intermixed with, American troops. The combat lasted six hours, ending only at 1730 that evening. The North Vietnamese left behind four dead. Twelve others became prisoners. Two Americans and an ARVN interpreter also died in this action.

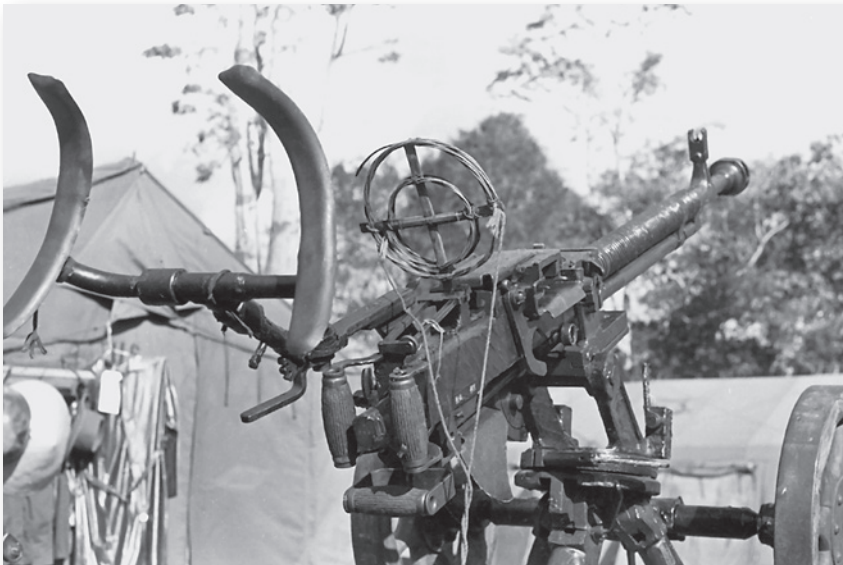
Bravo Company of 2/12 Cavalry also clashed with PAVN troops on November 4, in a riverbed 7km northeast of where the hospital firefight had taken place three days earlier. In the firefight that followed, the Americans suffered three fatalities while North Vietnamese left behind a dozen dead. The PAVN had apparently been guarding an arms dump and the Americans captured heavy weapons, including recoilless rifles, 82mm mortars, and 12.7mm machine guns.

At about noon on November 6, B Company of 2/8 Cavalry, operating between the Meur and Tae rivers about 6km north and slightly west of the site of the PAVN hospital, ran into dug-in PAVN troops. The Americans started to take serious casualties and became pinned down. The company commander thought he detected the PAVN probing for his flanks and called for reinforcements. But the reinforcements also became pinned down. The Americans were unable to carry out any decisive maneuver, and after dark the PAVN broke contact and disappeared. The action on November 6 cost the Americans 26 dead and 53 wounded. 2/8 Cavalry claimed to have found the bodies of 77 North Vietnamese troops. But even at this stage in the war, such claims were often wildly inaccurate.

Disappointment with the outcome of the November 6 firefight may have been the last straw for Harry Kinnard. On November 7 he decided to

withdraw 1st Brigade from operations in Pleiku Province and to send 3rd Brigade to take its place. Since October 27, 1st Cavalry Division had sustained 59 dead and 196 wounded in this campaign: not particularly heavy casualties by the standards of later periods of the war. It was the relative lack of achievements to show for them that was apparently causing such extreme frustration for Kinnard and his superiors.

A Type 54 12.7mm heavy machine gun, a Chinese-produced copy of the Soviet DShK used by PAVN troops as a dual-purpose anti-aircraft and infantry weapon. This example, captured by 1st Cavalry troops during the Pleiku campaign, has a crude replacement anti-aircraft sight fashioned from local materials. (Lt. Col. John J. Killian/US Army)





UH-1D Hueys of Bravo Company, 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion, carry troops to an objective in Pleiku Province. Initially codenamed "alloys" by the 1st Cavalry Division, troop carriers became known more generally to soldiers in Vietnam as "slicks" because of their streamlined appearance in comparison to the heavily armed Huey gunships. (J. D. Coleman Collection/The Vietnam Center and Archive/Texas Tech University)

3RD BRIGADE TAKES OVER, NOVEMBER 9–12, 1965

The process of pulling 1st Brigade's units out of the campaign and substituting those of 3rd Brigade started on November 9 and took about four days. That period constituted a hiatus in which there were no substantial contacts between the 1st Cavalry Division and the PAVN. By the end of it, the PAVN 33rd Regiment had completed its retreat to the Communist base area which included the Chu Pong Massif and adjacent areas of the Ia Drang Valley. The 32nd Regiment had completed its withdrawal two weeks earlier. The mission of the 1st Cavalry Division had apparently been to intercept the retreat of the forces involved in the Plei Me operation and to annihilate them before they got back to their base areas. Though this was probably clear to any American commander at the time, by November 12 the opportunity to accomplish that mission had already passed.

3rd Brigade's involvement in the campaign did not begin particularly well. All three of its battalions—1/7, 2/7, and 2/5—initially conducted searches in the hill country east and south of Plei Me. Apparently they did so on the instructions of Major General Stanley "Swede" Larsen, the Field Force commander, whose intervention in the campaign may have reflected the exasperation of his immediate superior, William Westmoreland. Why Larsen directed 3rd Brigade to focus on that area is unclear. By November 12, it was becoming increasingly evident that it was, in Dick Knowles' words, "a dry hole." Agitation at all levels in the American chain of command apparently continued to grow.

THE RAID ON CATECKA, NOVEMBER 12/13, 1965

As if to compound still further 1st Cavalry Division's frustration and embarrassment, on the night of November 12/13 the Communists raided Stadium—the base on the Catecka tea plantation where 3rd Brigade had its command post. The attack involved 26 members of the PAVN 952nd Sapper Battalion, guided by local guerrillas. A mortar battery with two 60mm and

two 82mm mortars opened up from a position about 450m north of the base, aiming at fuel dumps and aircraft on the ground while sappers carrying explosive charges attacked through the perimeter wire from the north and west. American troops defending Stadium fought back. ARA helicopters based at Catecka were soon in the air. Identifying the mortar battery from its muzzle flashes, they quickly silenced it. The raid lasted only about 45 minutes. No aircraft or fuel supplies were destroyed. Seven Americans were killed and 23 wounded. The attackers left six bodies behind. After the raid, Colonel Brown, commanding 3rd Brigade, insisted that an infantry company with the sole mission of defending the base should always be held at Stadium.

THE SHIFT TOWARD THE CHU PONG MASSIF, NOVEMBER 10–14, 1965

Up to this point the 1st Cavalry Division's campaign in Pleiku had been practically a textbook case of the failure to coordinate and exploit intelligence. Studies carried out after the campaign indicated that some groups of South Vietnamese and American intelligence officers at ARVN II Corps HQ and in MACV were well aware that the Chu Pong Massif and immediately adjacent areas of the Ia Drang Valley constituted a major, longstanding Communist base area. With that knowledge it would have been a reasonable assumption that at least some of the forces that had taken part in the Plei Me operation were retreating to that base. Had 1st Cavalry Division operated on that assumption from the outset, search and pursuit operations would surely have been much more efficient and effective. But either intelligence officers at II Corps and MACV failed to disseminate their knowledge of the Chu Pong/Ia Drang base area to the 1st Cavalry Division, or the 1st Cavalry Division, for a lengthy period, paid little attention. There is some evidence to suggest that the main problem was the latter.

Fortunately for the Americans, 3rd Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division established better liaison with II Corps than 1st Brigade had done. According to one account, on November 10 Brown's deputy, Lieutenant Colonel Edward C. Meyer, sent an intelligence officer, Captain Pritchard, to consult with II Corps. Pritchard came back reporting that II Corps' intelligence officers and their American advisors believed the Chu Pong Massif and the adjacent part of the Ia Drang Valley to be a well-established Communist base and that the entire PAVN 66th Regiment (not yet heavily engaged in combat) was currently stationed there.

At a meeting in Knowles' Pleiku headquarters on the morning of November 13, Larsen made it clear to Knowles that it was the overriding duty of the 1st Cavalry Division to find and bring to battle large bodies of Communist troops without further delay. Clearly, higher authority (probably including Westmoreland) was losing patience with what seemed, up to this point, a remarkably inefficient performance by the 1st Cavalry Division. Far from having vindicated the concepts of air mobility on which its existence was based, the division was so far failing to justify the enormous logistical strain involved in supporting its operations in Pleiku. How far Knowles and Brown actually believed what II Corps' and 3rd Brigade's intelligence officers were telling them about the Chu Pong is uncertain. But within about 24 hours of the Larsen–Knowles meeting at Pleiku, the 3rd Brigade abandoned

its search south of Plei Me and plunged into the heart of the Communist Chu Pong–Ia Drang base area.

On Saturday November 13, Lieutenant Colonel “Hal” Moore’s 1/7 Cavalry was searching areas immediately south and west of Plei Me without making contact with the North Vietnamese. At 1700 Colonel Tim Brown flew south from Catecka to meet Moore at the command post of Alpha Company, 1/7. Brown instructed Moore to take his battalion to search for Communist forces on the eastern edge of the Chu Pong Massif the following morning and to expect to remain in that area throughout November 14 and 15. When operating in that area Moore’s battalion could expect to receive artillery support from two batteries established at LZ Falcon near the junction of the River Meur and the River Tae.

Once his meeting with Brown was concluded, Moore contacted his company commanders to warn them of the operation to be mounted the following day. Two companies were in the field. They were told to prepare their men for pickup by helicopter at first light on November 14. Another company, B Company, had been selected to guard 3rd Brigade’s Stadium–Catecka base that night. Yet it was that company, which could not be expected to get much sleep, which Moore tasked to lead the assault. Moore and his staff arranged for B Company to be picked up by Chinooks at first light on November 14 and delivered to the airfield at Plei Me.



Troops of Company A, 1/5 Cavalry on patrol. (SFC Jack H. Yamaguchi/US Army)

LZ X-RAY, NOVEMBER 14–16, 1965

Hal Moore plans an air assault, November 13–14

Moore’s memoirs confirm that when planning the air assault mounted on November 14, he had been informed that the PAVN 66th Regiment was concentrated on the Chu Pong Massif and adjacent parts of the Ia Drang Valley. His mission was to take a single battalion into that area. Assuming that he considered his intelligence reliable, he must have known that his mission was intrinsically very dangerous. It was made more so by a paucity of available helicopters. This meant that his battalion would arrive piecemeal, not as a whole unit. Yet some aspects of Moore’s planning and execution of his mission significantly increased the intrinsic risks.

For various reasons including sickness and the termination of some soldiers’ enlistment periods before their replacements arrived, Moore’s battalion was significantly understrength, with only 431 personnel rather than the 633 authorized. The shortage of available helicopters was an even more serious problem. At this stage only 24 of the troop-carrying Huey “slicks” were available to Brown’s 3rd Brigade, which was making the main effort of the 1st Cavalry Division. Brown reckoned that his other two battalions—2/7 and 2/5 Cavalry—would need four slicks each just to keep operating at the most minimal level. That left only 16 for Moore’s

1st Cavalry troops en route to an objective. North Vietnamese troops bivouacked on the Chu Pong were taken by surprise at the sudden appearance of Moore's airmobile troops on the morning of November 14; at the time of the assault, many groups of PAVN soldiers were foraging and senior commanders were absent. (J. D. Coleman Collection/The Vietnam Center and Archive/Texas Tech University)



1/7 Cavalry, which would constitute the point of the 1st Cavalry Division spear on Sunday November 14, 1965. Almost certainly the acute shortage of slicks at this critical juncture was owing to the prodigious mechanical wear and tear inflicted by two and a half weeks of frenetic, but for the most part rather ineffective, activity October 27–November 12. A not-insignificant proportion of the slicks would have been grounded because of a strict army helicopter maintenance schedule and the need to replace unserviceable parts.

The UH-1D was designed to accommodate 11 fully equipped troops, but the exigencies of operating in Vietnam's tropical climate reduced that number to six or seven; in the thinner air of the Central Highlands, a slick could only carry about five. In the first lift, therefore, 16 Hueys could deliver only 80 troops to the landing zone. Even if no slicks were shot down or suffered mechanical failures, it would take six lifts to deliver the whole battalion. Moore's staff reckoned it would take the Hueys roughly half an hour to fly from Plei Me—1/7's base for this operation—to the eastern edge of the Chu Pong Massif and back. So even if all went according to plan, the first 80 troops on the ground would be isolated and vulnerable for 30 minutes before the second lift arrived.

As if that did not entail sufficient risk, Moore ordered that the first company to land should send one platoon in a probe toward the eastern edge of the Chu Pong Massif looking for the enemy. The rest of the company would form up in an assault formation—apparently in order to be ready to deliver an attack if the enemy were found. This was unconventional. Normally, in such circumstances, the initial mission of the first company to land would be to establish a defensive perimeter giving 360-degree protection to the landing zone. Moore's plan eschewed this precaution, accepting the risk that the North Vietnamese would identify and overrun the landing zone before the battalion as a whole had arrived.

Though Moore's staff studied the map on the evening of November 13 and identified several possible landing zones, it was not until the morning of November 14 that a final selection was made. After careful aerial reconnaissance Moore selected a clearing designated LZ X-Ray. It was of

roughly the right size in relation to the number of slicks available and it was right on the edge of the Chu Pong Massif, offering the best prospect of early contact with the enemy.

By approximately 0830 Moore had made his final decision as to the landing zone. At Plei Me at 0845, he issued his operations order giving his company commanders and the helicopter pilots their final briefing. He explained that one North Vietnamese battalion was likely to be in the immediate vicinity of the landing zone with the possibility of others not far away. Thirty minutes before helicopters delivered the first lift to X-Ray, artillery at Falcon would fire on other nearby clearings as a form of deception. Then for 20 minutes the guns would fire on the area immediately around X-Ray. As the tube artillery lifted, fire from ARA and helicopter gunships would be substituted and the 16 slicks would deliver the battalion command group (including Moore) and part of Captain John D. Herren's Bravo Company. Captain Herren would immediately push a platoon toward the Chu Pong Massif, forming the rest of his available force into an assault formation on the LZ.

The balance of Bravo Company and part of Captain Ramon A. Nadal's Alpha Company would then arrive in the second helicopter lift, Charlie and Delta companies in subsequent lifts. Captain Robert H. Edward's Charlie Company would, when it first landed, form the battalion reserve, but when Captain Louis R. Lefebvre's Delta Company arrived it would take over as the reserve while Charlie Company moved west and northwest to search the massif. Moore's briefing ended at approximately 0915. He expected the first helicopters to land at X-Ray at 1030.

The air assault on LZ X-Ray: Sunday morning, November 14

The second artillery battery required at LZ Falcon to provide fire support for Moore's battalion at X-Ray was moved there by the same Chinooks that had shifted Bravo Company from Catecka to Plei Me earlier in the morning. It was a little late arriving and that slightly set back timings for the whole operation. Preparatory fires did not start until 1017. Moore noted, however, that when it came the fire was impressive and very accurate. The explosion of a white phosphorus shell on the landing zone signaled the end of tube artillery fire. The ARA and gunships took over. As the first slicks approached, some of their passengers fired their M16s. Those PAVN troops on the lower slopes of the Chu Pong, closest to the LZ, were stunned by the bombardment. The initial landing, at 1048, was unopposed.

The LZ and the Massif: American first impressions and actions on landing

LZ X-Ray was an east-west oval bisected by a grove of trees. Yellowish-brown, waist-high plateau grass grew all over it and extended around it, providing excellent cover for potential attackers. The grove of trees in the middle effectively divided X-Ray into two smaller landing zones, each capable of accommodating four or five Hueys. Close to the center of the grove of trees was a termite mound, about 12ft broad and very hard.

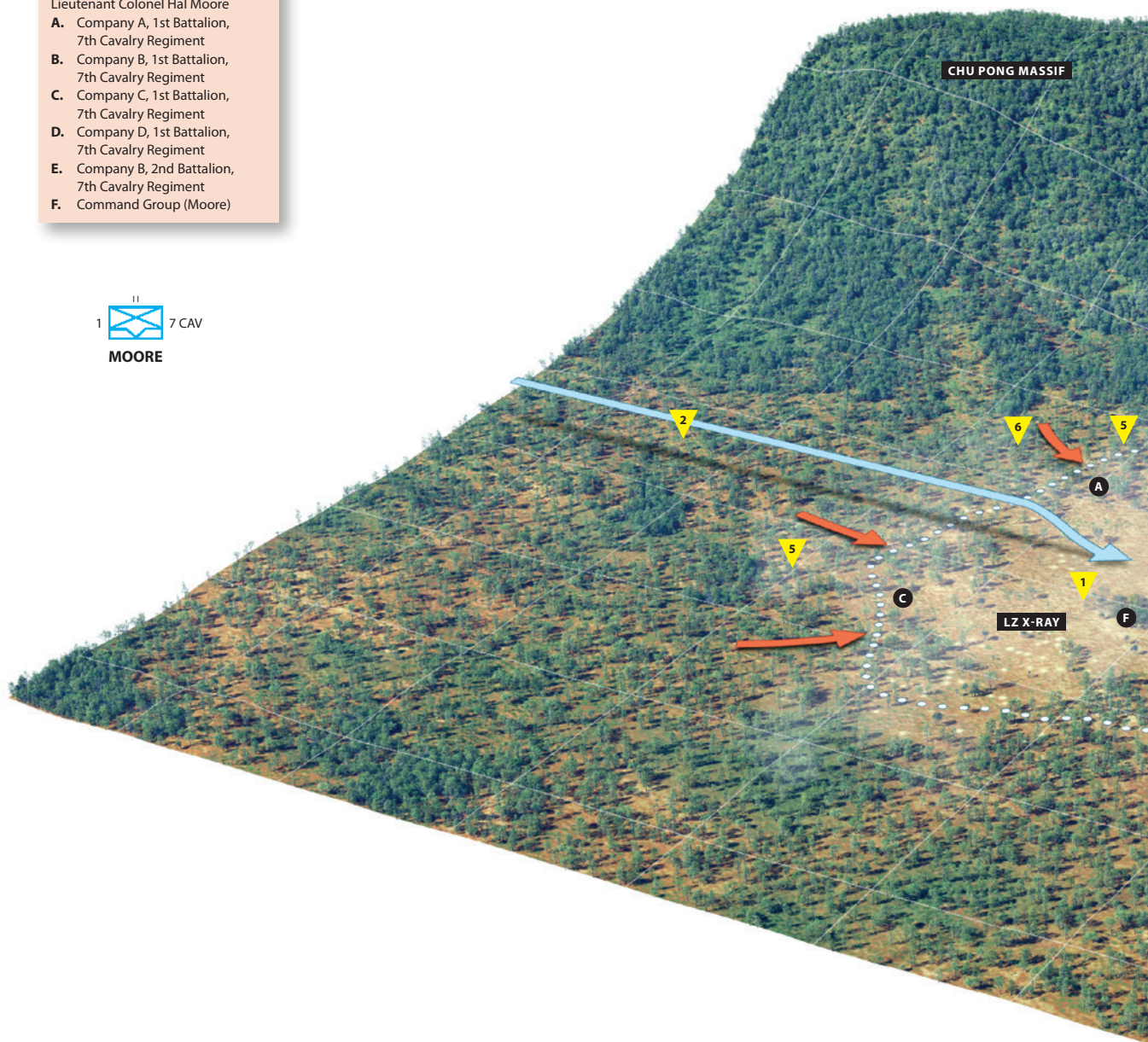
Moore established his command post next to the mound. His command group was a slimmed-down affair consisting of Sergeant Major Basil Plumley, Captain Metsker, the battalion intelligence officer, Mr Nik, a Highlander

Note: gridlines are shown at intervals of 250m (273 yards)

US

Lieutenant Colonel Hal Moore

- A. Company A, 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment
- B. Company B, 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment
- C. Company C, 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment
- D. Company D, 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment
- E. Company B, 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment
- F. Command Group (Moore)



EVENTS

November 14

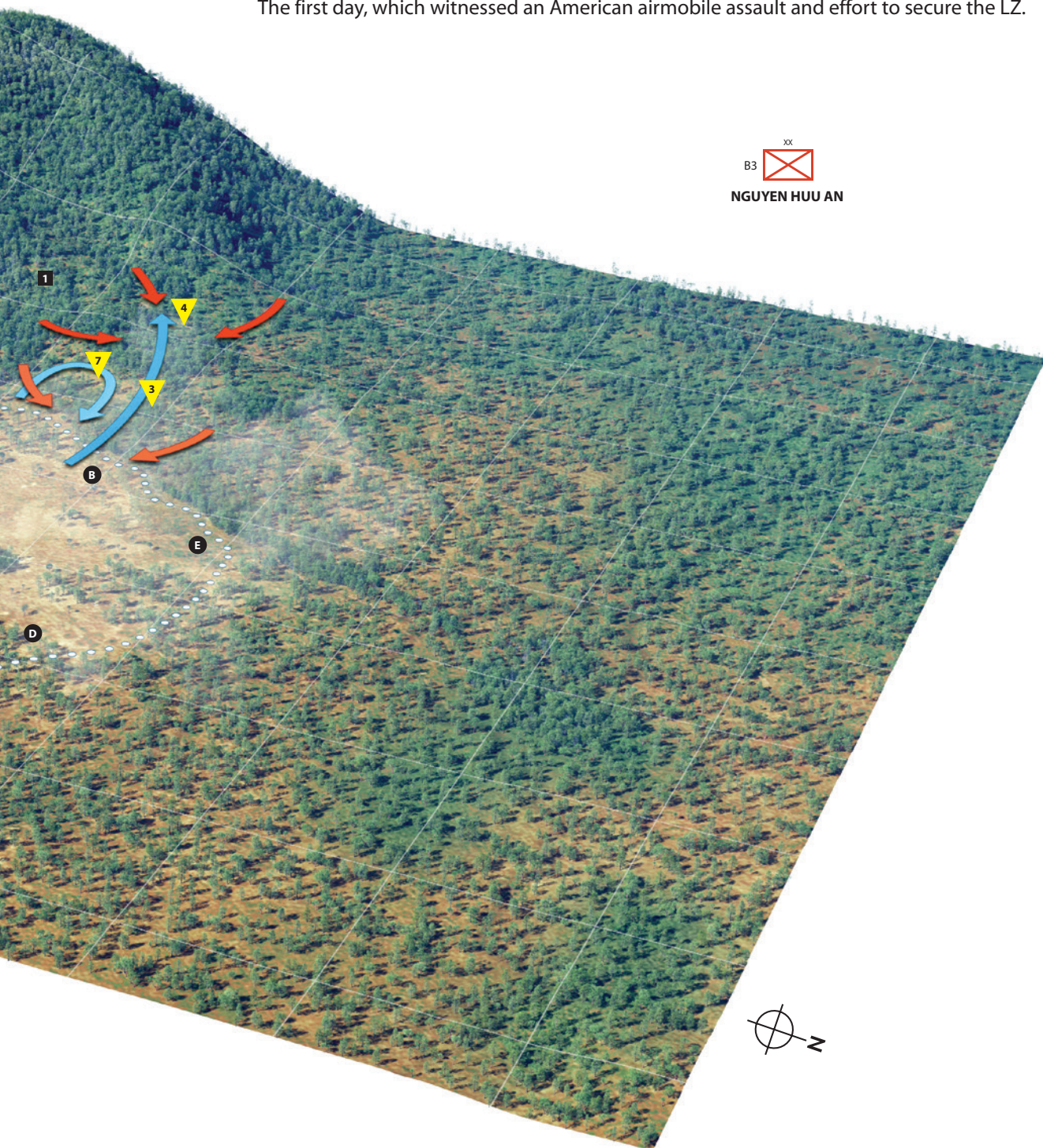
1. 1017: A US artillery barrage begins, followed by short "prep" by ARA and helicopter gunships. At the end, a single white phosphorus round is fired onto the LZ to signal the troop helicopters to land.
2. 1048: The first lift of 1/7 Cavalry arrives at LZ X-Ray, delivering the battalion command group and elements of Bravo Company unopposed. Additional lifts deliver the remainder of Bravo Company and most of Alpha Company.
3. 1230–1245: Bravo Company advances along the ridge of the Chu Pong Massif. The leading platoons encounter the main body of the PAVN 9th Battalion, 66th Regiment, meeting stiff opposition.
4. 1330: 2nd Platoon, Bravo Company is surrounded and cut off from the American force, 300m from the LZ clearing.

5. 1330–1430: Alpha Company and recently landed elements of Charlie Company are sent forward to join the remaining platoons of Bravo Company in an attempt to reestablish contact with the isolated platoon. PAVN forces attempt to envelop the American troops (unsuccessfully) by moving along the dry creek bed on the American left flank. The remainder of Bravo Company is pulled back as Alpha Company advances to consolidate an American defensive line along the creek bed. Charlie Company deploys on the US left flank to protect against attacks to the south.
6. 1430–1615: US troops of 1/7 Cavalry continue to land at the LZ and deploy to guard the perimeter as the PAVN 9th Battalion assaults the southwest sector of the American line with approximately 200 troops, following a mortar attack at approximately 1445. The attack is broken off at 1615.
7. 1620–1740: US Alpha and Bravo companies advance in an abortive effort to rescue the isolated platoon. In opposing them, the remnants of the PAVN 9th Battalion disintegrate. Alpha and Bravo companies are pulled back to the perimeter. Meanwhile, reinforcements from Bravo Company, 2/7 Cavalry have landed, and reinforce the LZ perimeter. Fighting dies down for the evening.

LZ X-RAY: NOVEMBER 14, 1965

The first day, which witnessed an American airmobile assault and effort to secure the LZ.

XX
B3
NGUYEN HUU AN



PAVN

Senior Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Huu An
1. 9th Battalion, 66th Regiment

who served as English–Vietnamese interpreter, and two radio operators in addition to Moore himself. Moore’s operations officer, Captain Gregory “Matt” Dillon, along with the forward air controller and the artillery liaison officer, remained in the command helicopter orbiting between the Ia Drang and Plei Me.

From the air the heavily forested Chu Pong Massif did not look especially impressive but, rising 500m above the floor of the Ia Drang Valley, it seemed huge and forbidding from X-Ray. Nevertheless Captain John Herren, commander of Bravo Company, dispatched a platoon 100m west of X-Ray in the direction of the massif. Everyone else remained on the LZ for the time being.

PAVN problems: morning and early afternoon, November 14

Most of the evidence suggests that the arrival of an American battalion at the foot of the Chu Pong Massif at this time took the North Vietnamese completely by surprise. We do not know where the main headquarters of General Man’s Central Highlands Front was before and during the X-Ray battle. One suggestion is that it was on the western edge of the Chu Pong Massif in Cambodian territory, about a day’s march from X-Ray, but that is by no means certain. We do know that Man was not physically present to take command in what was perhaps the most important engagement of the war so far. According to the memoirs of one PAVN officer, he had gone to Darlac Province, trying to organize food supplies for his forces. (Despite the enormous efforts of Communist logisticians to prepare for the campaign, these now appear to have been in a parlous state.) Shortly before departing for Darlac, Man had dispatched his deputy, Nguyen Huu An, to establish a forward headquarters on the Chu Pong Massif. But An and his senior commissar, Dang Vu Hiep, seem to have arrived on the massif only at about 1300 Saigon time. By that point battle had already commenced.

To make matters worse for the North Vietnamese, the 66th Regiment, their principal battle-worthy force in the area, had only recently completed its march down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. This regiment’s troops were still trying to get themselves organized: “building huts, digging fortifications and transporting rice and ammunition” from Central Highlands Front caches. The troops’ health “had deteriorated during the long march down the trail” and they had not had adequate time to rest and recuperate. Each unit was reportedly at about 80 percent of its authorized strength. This would suggest that individual battalions of the PAVN 66th Regiment were roughly equal in numerical strength to Moore’s 1/7 Cavalry.

Of the 66th Regiment units, only the 9th Battalion was within immediate striking distance of X-Ray: its main bivouac area was about 1km to the west of the LZ. The 7th Battalion was on the Chu Pong but about 5km away, on its southeastern face, adjacent to the regimental headquarters. The 8th Battalion was even further away, in an area called Ba Bi on the other side of the Ia Drang. Surviving elements of the 33rd Regiment were reportedly deployed along a 3km stretch of the Ia Drang Valley, on the eastern side of the Chu Pong Massif. That regiment had, however, been terribly hammered from the air in the siege of Plei Me and further battered by American airpower and by the Cavalry Division during its retreat. No source from the Communist side indicates that it did any fighting at X-Ray. The 32nd Regiment, also

severely battered, was in the valley of the Ia Drang, but it was about 15km to the northwest. It too played no part.

As already noted, North Vietnamese command and control was primitive. The PAVN had relatively little in the way of radio equipment and was often afraid to use what it had for fear of American interception. Arriving only after the battle started, An had no time to establish communication with the units he commanded. He was not even sure where some of them were. The 66th Regiment and the 9th Battalion commanders were surveying terrain several miles from X-Ray when the Americans arrived. Trying to find his way back to his command post, the regimental commander became hopelessly lost and played no part in the X-Ray battle. The 9th Battalion commander did manage to reconnect with elements of his battalion on November 14, but was unable to exercise any real control.

It seems that no one above the level of a company commander was able to take command of any substantial group of PAVN troops before evening on the first day. It speaks volumes for PAVN combat motivation and initiative at lower levels of command that the Americans nevertheless found themselves so ferociously engaged that they considered their situation critical.

Bravo Company's advance up the Chu Pong Massif: 1120–1245, November 14

At about 1120 Bravo Company's patrol captured a PAVN soldier. Moore questioned him through his interpreter before sending him away by helicopter for further interrogation. The prisoner stated that there were three battalions in the surrounding area and that they were keen to kill Americans. Most of Captain Nadal's Alpha Company had arrived at X-Ray by 1210. Eager to contact the enemy, Moore ordered Herren to take all of Bravo Company and advance northwest up a "finger-like" ridge on the eastern flank of the Chu Pong Massif and "develop the situation." Some minutes later he told Nadal to take Alpha Company and follow Bravo Company as soon as enough of Charlie Company had arrived to



Moore's command post at LZ X-Ray comes under fire from PAVN troops. A battle that began on the offense for troopers of the 1/7 Cavalry turned within hours into a defensive action as the PAVN 7th Battalion, 66th Regiment poured an increasingly heavy volume of fire into the LZ. (J. D. Coleman Collection/The Vietnam Center and Archive/Texas Tech University)



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LZ X-RAY, NOVEMBER 14, 1965 (PP. 60–61)

Soldiers of Charlie Company, 1/7 Cavalry join the fight at LZ-X-Ray on the afternoon of November 14. Arriving by helicopter at 1442 on the fifth troop lift of the day, troops of Charlie and Delta companies entered a maelstrom of withering fire from North Vietnamese attackers advancing on the western and southern sectors of the LZ perimeter. Limitations imposed on helicopter performance by the altitude and climate of the Central Highlands meant that during the initial morning lifts, troops were delivered to the LZ in penny packets of no more than five men per aircraft. By mid-afternoon, the UH-1D “slicks” had burned enough fuel that one or two additional infantrymen could be taken aboard, but the process of troop deployment was still agonizingly slow, even as the North Vietnamese force was recovering from its initial surprise and attacking in greater numbers.

Now, just four hours into the battle and leading a force still understrength, battalion commander Hal Moore was faced with the prospect of the LZ being overrun, even while considering how best to rescue a platoon isolated on the Chu Pong. The increasing volume of incoming small-arms and mortar fire posed a significant threat to the handful of helicopters providing the only immediate means of reinforcement and resupply. So, despite

an urgent need to land the remainder of his battalion, Moore reluctantly closed the LZ halfway through the fifth lift, diverting many of the inbound troops.

Shown here is one of the last UH-1D troop transports able to land, captured at the moment it touches earth: troops of Charlie Company (1) begin to exit the helicopter. The crew chief (2) is seated directly behind the copilot (3) on the left side of the cabin. He is wearing standard infantry fatigues, black leather combat boots, an OD APH-5 flight helmet, and an M1952 flak. The crew chief is paying attention to the troops leaving the helicopter, in order to be able to signal the all clear. The 1st Cavalry troopers wear standard OG sateen cotton utility uniforms with black leather combat boots, and carry M1956 web gear. The sergeant at center of image (4) is equipped with an M79 grenade launcher plus M1911 pistol in belt holster; the remaining troops are each armed with the XM16E1 rifle (5).

The soldiers who landed raced to reinforce a thin line holding the perimeter and helped to turn the North Vietnamese assault. As evening fell, the American soldiers were firmly in possession of the LZ and, for the moment, in control of the battle.

secure the LZ, though how Nadal was to make that judgment does not seem to have been indicated.

Bravo Company's advance began at approximately 1230 with two platoons leading and one following. The outpost line of the PAVN 66th Regiment's 9th Battalion had apparently disintegrated as a result of the American bombardment prior to the landing. No information had reached battalion headquarters as to where exactly the Americans had landed. No one in the 9th Battalion knew anything about the American advance up the Chu Pong Massif until their troops were within 100m of the battalion's main concentration area. Vietnamese Communist accounts indicate that men of the 9th Battalion perceived that the Americans were advancing in two columns (probably a reference to Herren's leading platoons), one headed directly for the 11th Company's position and the other toward battalion headquarters. In such circumstances it would have been all too easy to panic.

The PAVN reaction 1245–1330, November 14

Postwar Vietnamese Communist accounts openly admit that there were indeed instances of panic and dereliction of duty. The 9th Battalion's political officer, left in charge in the battalion commander's absence, lost his nerve and fled. First Lieutenant Nhoi found himself the most senior individual in the battalion headquarters. He summoned help from nearby companies and ordered cooks, runners, and medics to grab weapons and fight. The 11th Company commander also kept his nerve. Initially he ordered all three of his rifle platoons to fire at the column advancing toward them. He then retained one platoon to "block the front of the enemy column while the other two platoons circled round to the rear." The other company commanders had a bit more time to think. They too seem to have behaved professionally. "[As] work details returned and commanders pieced together what was happening," all four companies of the 9th Battalion joined in the battle.

Moore's ordering—long before his whole battalion had landed at X-Ray—of an attack up the slope of the Chu Pong Massif by a single, initially unsupported rifle company against PAVN positions (the exact location and strength of which he did not know) seems, with the benefit of hindsight, distinctly reckless. As Bravo Company's 1st Platoon moved up the left side of the finger-like ridge pointing northwest up the massif, it became pinned down by PAVN fire. On the orders of Captain Herren, Second Lieutenant Henry T. Herrick's 2nd Platoon was maneuvering to the right of the ridge in an effort to clear the opposition in front of 1st Platoon when it too became pinned down. Then, apparently between 1300 and 1330, substantial numbers of North Vietnamese counterattacked down the slope in the general direction of the American landing zone, surrounding Herrick's platoon and cutting it off from the remainder of B Company.

Up to 1330, Moore apparently believed that he was conducting an offensive operation which, while meeting some opposition, was going reasonably well. At that point, however, Captain Herren radioed Moore with the news that the North Vietnamese were counterattacking, that his company was in serious trouble, one platoon was isolated, and that he needed help. At roughly the same time, PAVN mortar rounds started exploding on X-Ray. Moore then realized he had a crisis on his hands. Not only was a platoon

cut off, but an enemy counterattack threatened his possession of the LZ and thus, potentially, the survival of his battalion.

Moore correctly concluded that the main threat to the LZ would come from North Vietnamese troops sweeping around Bravo Company's left flank as its other two rifle platoons moved right to rescue Herrick's. Sending one platoon of Nadal's Alpha Company to help Herren rescue the lost platoon, Moore ordered the rest of Alpha to support Bravo Company's left. At roughly the same time he sent recently landed troops from Captain Robert Edward's Charlie Company to cover Alpha Company's left. He also requested artillery and air support.

The hour between 1330 and 1430 on November 14 was extremely critical. Although Herren's rescue force got within about 75m of Herrick's platoon, that platoon remained cut off. At roughly the same time, North Vietnamese attempts to advance around Bravo Company's left flank by moving along a creek bed parallel to the edge of the LZ also failed. Alpha Company moved up to support Bravo's left, and as it did so brought the PAVN troops in the creek bed under fire, killing many of them. Alpha Company then defended the line of the creek. After its failed attempt to rescue Herrick's platoon, Moore ordered Bravo Company back to the creek line where it could form a continuous front with Alpha Company, blocking PAVN efforts to reach X-Ray from the west and northwest. Elements of Charlie Company that had arrived by this stage attempted to cover Alpha's left, thus protecting the LZ from attacks from the southwest and south.

From 1430 until at least 1530 the situation continued to look alarming from Moore's point of view. Vigorous North Vietnamese attacks on Alpha and Bravo companies continued and the northern and eastern sides of the LZ remained unprotected. Moore realized that if an attack came in from that direction it could overrun the LZ and might prove fatal. The Americans were too thin on the ground to comply with fundamental principles, not having all-round defense, defense in depth, or any sort of reserve. At 1442 the fifth helicopter lift arrived. But as the first eight slicks brought in most of the rest of Captain Edward's C Company, PAVN fire

Carefully coordinated air and artillery strikes hammered North Vietnamese troops relentlessly throughout the three-day battle at LZ X-Ray, averting disaster on several occasions. Here, a flight of F-100 fighter-bombers from the 481st Tactical Fighter Squadron returns from a combat mission. The 481st TFS flew sorties during this and other battles of the campaign. (US Air Force)



became so intense that Moore ordered the remaining eight not to attempt a landing at this time.

The newly arrived elements of Charlie Company almost immediately found themselves in the thick of it as the southwestern edge of the LZ came under fierce attack. The fighting was savage and bloody with severe losses on both sides. Moore's battalion might have been overwhelmed had it not been for the artillery and air support they were able to summon. For all their determination, the North Vietnamese could not indefinitely endure fire of such intensity. They broke off the action on this sector of the field at approximately 1615.

The overall volume of incoming fire at X-Ray had diminished by 1520. This permitted helicopters to deliver Captain Lefebvre's Delta Company, including the battalion reconnaissance platoon. Moore used Delta Company to defend the northeastern side of the LZ, filling a gap between Charlie and Bravo. By about 1400 Moore had, for the first time at the LZ, something approaching all-round defense. Using the reconnaissance platoon, he was even able to create a minuscule reserve. But he positioned it not by his command post near the center of the LZ (in what would have been textbook manner) but immediately behind the rest of the numerically weak Delta Company, where he thought his perimeter most vulnerable. By about 1700, however, PAVN attacks on all parts of X-Ray had practically ceased and the Americans were themselves attacking.

American efforts to rescue the isolated platoon: 1620–1740, November 14

The story of Herrick's isolated platoon figures prominently in American accounts of the X-Ray fighting. It does not appear at all in Vietnamese Communist histories. This is not altogether surprising. The fog of war, especially in the early stages of the battle, lay thick over the whole battlefield and it was thickest over the North Vietnamese. Given the primitive state of PAVN field communications and the virtual collapse of command and control above company level, it is very likely that no senior PAVN officer ever knew that a substantial group of Americans was isolated. It is quite possible that nobody above the level of platoon commander knew. It thus seems unlikely that the PAVN ever made a concerted effort to wipe out the lost platoon.

Yet, for the Americans thus isolated, their situation was terrifying. They were stranded up the slope of the Chu Pong Massif about 300m northwest of the X-Ray perimeter. The platoon had established a perimeter of its own, about 25m wide, with the dead and wounded in the middle. By late afternoon Herrick and the sergeant who immediately succeeded him in command were both dead. By 1620 the platoon's third squad leader, Sergeant Clyde E. Savage, had taken over. Savage is generally given a high degree of credit for saving what was left of the platoon. He told everyone to stay where they were and keep low. He used the radio to bring in accurate artillery fire around the platoon's perimeter.

In order to get them ready to rescue the lost platoon, under the cover of artillery fire, Moore withdrew Alpha and Bravo companies slightly, from their position in the dry creek bed to the edge of the clearing. This allowed their wounded to be taken away by helicopter and gave them a chance to reorganize. Then, at 1620, with the support of tube artillery and ARA, they

mounted a coordinated assault. Both companies met intense fire, Bravo Company alone taking 30 casualties. They managed to advance no more than 150m toward the isolated platoon. At 1740 Moore ordered Nadal and Herren, the company commanders concerned, to call off the attack. They would try again later. Save for close artillery support, Savage's platoon was, for the time being, on its own.

Organizing American reinforcements: afternoon and evening, November 14

At some point on the afternoon of November 14, Hal Moore radioed Colonel Tim Brown requesting another company to reinforce X-Ray. Brown provided him with Captain Myron F. Diduryk's B Company, 2/7 Cavalry, which had been tasked with guarding the Stadium/Catecka base that night. The first 120 personnel from that unit arrived at X-Ray by helicopter not long after 1700. Brown also agreed to Moore's request for continuous artillery support during the hours of darkness.

Brown anticipated that the battle would become fiercer on November 15 with the North Vietnamese concentrating all the forces they had available to annihilate Moore's battalion. He thus set in motion the delivery of far more reinforcement than Moore had asked for, arranging for most of Lieutenant Colonel Tully's 2/5 Cavalry to move by helicopter to a clearing called LZ Victor about 3km southeast of X-Ray. From there it would march to X-Ray early the next morning. Transported by four Hueys in relays, two companies of 2/5 Cavalry had arrived at Victor by nightfall on November 14, while a third company remained at Falcon providing security for the artillery there. Further arrangements were made to deliver A Company, 2/7 Cavalry to X-Ray on the morning of November 15. The remainder of 2/7 Cavalry was to air assault into a clearing called LZ Macon, about 4km north of X-Ray, and to help establish a firebase to which two batteries of 105mm guns, one of them newly provided by division, would later be delivered.

Tim Brown was prepared to throw 3rd Brigade's whole weight into the X-Ray action. He kept Dick Knowles informed by radio, and briefed him face-to-face at Catecka/Stadium in the afternoon. Knowles then suggested that Harry Kinnard come forward (from the main 1st Cavalry Division HQ near An Khe) to Catecka for his own briefing. So uninvolved was Kinnard in the day-to-day management of the Pleiku campaign that he was reportedly surprised to learn that his division had troops as far west

Ordnance dropped by a fighter-bomber explodes on PAVN positions at the south edge of LZ X-Ray. Despite reversals suffered earlier in the day, American troops were able to regain the initiative by evening, thanks in no small part to close air and artillery support. (J. D. Coleman Collection/The Vietnam Center and Archive/Texas Tech University)



as the Chu Pong Massif. Once briefed, however, he made additional resources available to 3rd Brigade. These included some extra helicopters, an artillery battery, and 1/5 Cavalry.

Evening and night on and around LZ X-Ray, November 14–15

Knowing nothing of the isolated platoon, the North Vietnamese perceived the American attempt to rescue it late on the afternoon of November 14 as a renewed

attempt to storm the Chu Pong Massif. Paradoxically, not long after the Americans abandoned their attempt to rescue the lost platoon, much of the 9th Battalion, 66th Regiment, which had done all the fighting for the PAVN that day, reached breaking point and disintegrated, surviving troops abandoning their positions and fleeing back up the slope of the massif.

The 66th Regiment's commissar, La Ngoc Chau, had arrived in the 9th Battalion area at some point in the afternoon. But his efforts to exert any control were completely ineffective. At dusk Chau received an order from An's forward B3 headquarters to rally all available troops and mount a concerted night attack. The 7th Battalion, not yet involved in the X-Ray battle, was the only unit over which Chau could exert any control. He could not even control all of that battalion. One of its companies was away fetching supplies. Nevertheless Chau and the 66th Regiment's deputy commander tried to organize a night attack, using the understrength 7th Battalion and whatever fragments of the 9th Battalion they could rally. Command and control continued to be a huge problem. Except for the flickering illumination provided by the explosion of American shells, it was pitch dark. The terrain was unfamiliar to 7th Battalion troops and the American fire was intense enough to disrupt movement. There was no attack that night: the troops intended to execute that operation had not reached the American perimeter by dawn.

After a frantic and bloody day, for Americans at X-Ray the evening of November 14 was relatively calm. Hueys came in with food, water, and ammunition and took out the wounded and some of the dead. American accounts agree that there was no major night attack, but they describe occasional probes by groups of up to ten North Vietnamese. A US Air Force C-123 flare ship remained on station during the hours of darkness to provide illumination if needed. Savage's lost platoon had, in addition to artillery fire, the support of an orbiting AC-47 fixed-wing gunship, which fired 12,000 rounds at high ground just west of the platoon's location. The surviving members of the platoon experienced several anxious hours. They later reported their perimeter probed on three occasions that night though they suffered no further fatalities. Moore spent much of the night planning a fresh effort to rescue them.



Specialist 4 Clinton Poley, an assistant M60 gunner of Charlie Company, 1/7 Cavalry, was wounded on the morning of November 15 while defending his sector of the American line. His was one of the two M60 teams that prevented a North Vietnamese charge from overrunning Charlie Company during a large-scale attack by the PAVN 7th Battalion. (US Army)

Captain Joel Sugdinis, commander of Alpha Company, 2/7 Cavalry, consults with Moore at his command post after his company arrived to reinforce the perimeter at X-Ray on the morning of November 15. (US Army)



Monday morning, November 15

At 0640 on the morning of November 15, Moore ordered his company commanders to send patrols out 200m beyond the perimeter. Some of them only got 50m out. This triggered a general North Vietnamese attack starting about ten minutes later. PAVN troops had been crawling through the long grass apparently seeking to get very close to the American perimeter before mounting their assault. Charlie and Delta companies in the southern and southeastern parts of the perimeter came under the heaviest attack. The pressure was so serious that, at about 0745, Moore committed his one-platoon reserve at the junction of C and D companies.

By 0800 Moore was worried enough to demand immediate reinforcements. Brown responded that he would send in Alpha Company, 2/7 Cavalry as soon as the intensity of incoming fire at X-Ray had dropped to a point where helicopters could land with a reasonable degree of safety. Brown also ordered Lieutenant Colonel Tully, commanding 2/5 Cavalry, to prepare his battalion to march from LZ Victor to X-Ray. Over the next few hours, however, the most effective support for the defenders at X-Ray came from artillery and airpower. Air strikes had been coming in with increasing frequency that morning since the PAVN attacks began. At 0805 three F-100s dropped six napalm canisters and six other bombs and then carried out strafing runs in which they fired 2,400 20mm cannon rounds to within 100m of the perimeter. This seemed to diminish North Vietnamese pressure. But bringing air strikes so close to the perimeter was, of course, intrinsically dangerous. Later the same morning a napalm canister caused at least one American fatality.

By 0900 the volume of incoming fire at X-Ray had diminished to a point at which it seemed sensible to allow helicopters to fly in Captain Sugdinis's Alpha Company, 2/7 Cavalry. Moore immediately sent these troops to support Captain Edwards' Charlie Company, 1/7 Cavalry, which had sustained the heaviest losses. By approximately 0941 the North Vietnamese assaults had virtually ceased. Moore then carried out a reorganization of his perimeter and Tully's 2/5 Cavalry marched in, slowly and cautiously, from LZ Victor, arriving at noon.

Afternoon, Monday November 15

By noon on Monday November 15, the balance of forces, even in terms of numbers of riflemen on the battlefield, was overwhelmingly in Moore's favor. All the fighting on the Communist side at X-Ray on November 14 had been done by one understrength PAVN battalion: 9th Battalion, 66th Regiment. By early evening that battalion had been subjected to such overwhelming fire and had sustained such crippling losses that it had utterly collapsed. All the fighting on the morning of November 15 had been done by 7th Battalion, 66th Regiment, which was lacking one of its companies (away on a logistical mission) and thus even weaker than the 9th Battalion had been. Vietnamese Communist histories do not indicate that the 7th Battalion disintegrated as dramatically and completely as the 9th Battalion had done the previous day. By 0940, however, it was evidently incapable of further offensive effort. An's advanced B3 headquarters was trying to bring other PAVN troops to the X-Ray battlefield, but there were none immediately available.

In the absence of further PAVN attacks that day, Moore organized a three-company operation to rescue Sergeant Savage's isolated platoon, an operation supported with massive fires by tube artillery and ARA and executed with extreme caution. Mounted at 1315, it met little resistance. But it was 1615 by the time surviving members of the rescued platoon were back



A UH-1D of the 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion arrives at LZ X-Ray with supplies for the hard-pressed US troops. Helicopters provided a lifeline to the encircled airmobile troops on the ground, who—unlike conventional infantry—could not depend on resupply by truck. (Joseph L. Galloway)



Evacuating a casualty from LZ X-Ray: soldiers wounded in the battle were medevaced to An Khe or Qui Nhon for medical treatment, while the bodies of those killed in action were brought to Camp Holloway. (Joseph L. Galloway)

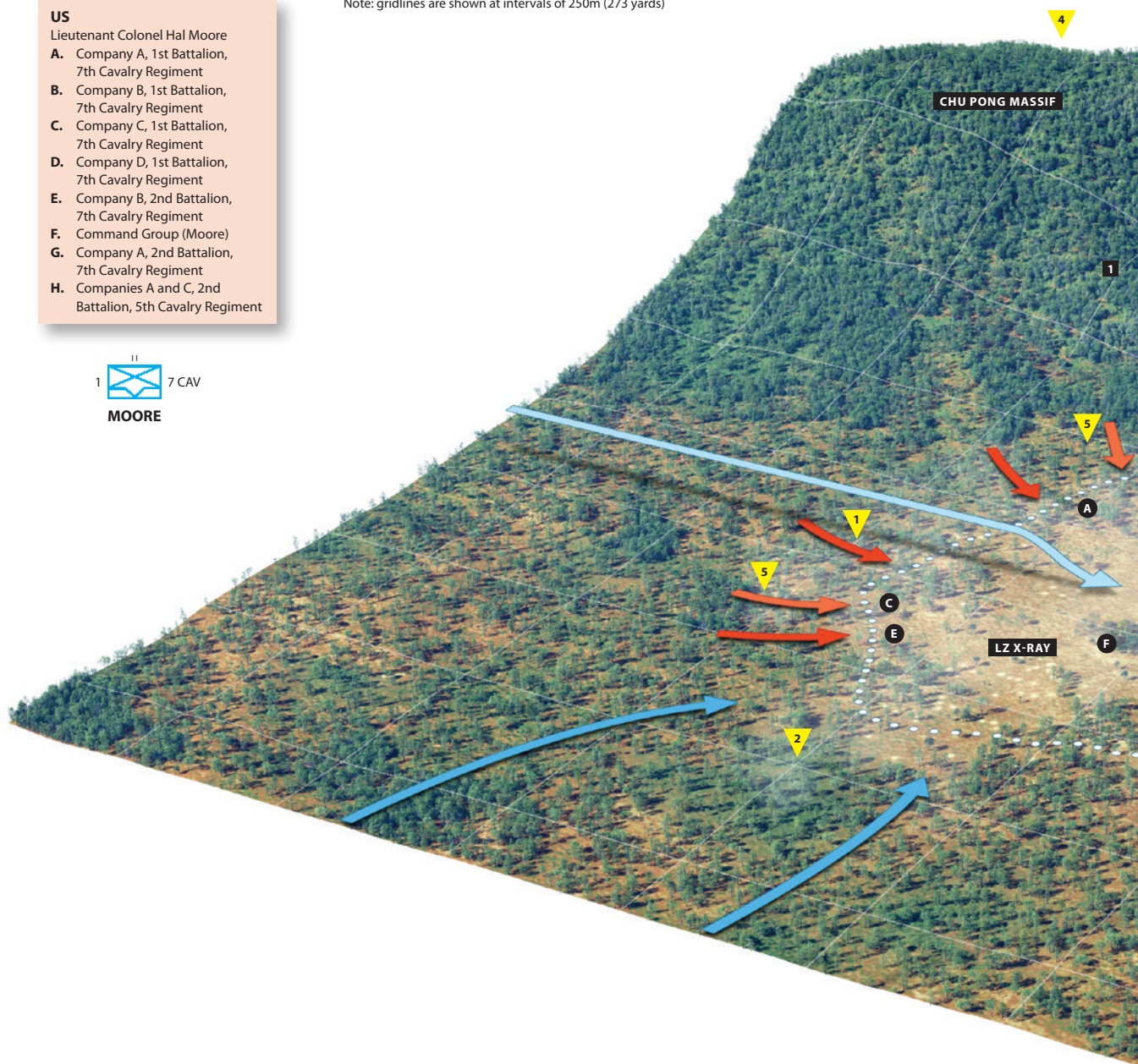
US

Lieutenant Colonel Hal Moore

- A. Company A, 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment
- B. Company B, 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment
- C. Company C, 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment
- D. Company D, 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment
- E. Company B, 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment
- F. Command Group (Moore)
- G. Company A, 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment
- H. Companies A and C, 2nd Battalion, 5th Cavalry Regiment



Note: gridlines are shown at intervals of 250m (273 yards)



EVENTS

November 15

1. 0640–0941: US patrols make contact with PAVN troops of the 7th Battalion, 66th Regiment, which has moved into positions formerly occupied by the 9th Battalion and stealthily advanced toward the American perimeter before dawn in anticipation of making a surprise attack at close range. The US patrols trigger this attack prematurely at 0650. The initial assault hits Charlie Company on the south side of perimeter, but by 0715 Delta Company on the northeast side is also under attack. PAVN troops cease attacks and withdraw at 0941. US forces are reinforced by Alpha Company, 2/7 Cavalry by air and repositioned. Bravo Company, 2/7 Cavalry replaces Charlie Company, 1/7 Cavalry at the south, which goes into reserve.

2. 1200: Reinforcements from 2/5 Cavalry begin to arrive on overland march from LZ Victor. By this time, the bulk of the PAVN 7th Battalion has been destroyed.

3. 1315–1615: A three-company assault (B of 1/7, A of 2/5, and C of 2/5) rescues the “lost platoon” at 1510, meeting little resistance and returning to the LZ perimeter. 2/5 Cavalry replaces Delta Company, 1/7 Cavalry in the perimeter that evening. Delta Company subsequently goes into reserve.

4. 1600: (outside map boundary) An Arc Light air strike composed of 18 B-52 bombers hits targets on the Chu Pong Massif 6km west of the LZ. Additional B-52 strikes will bomb the area until 22 November.

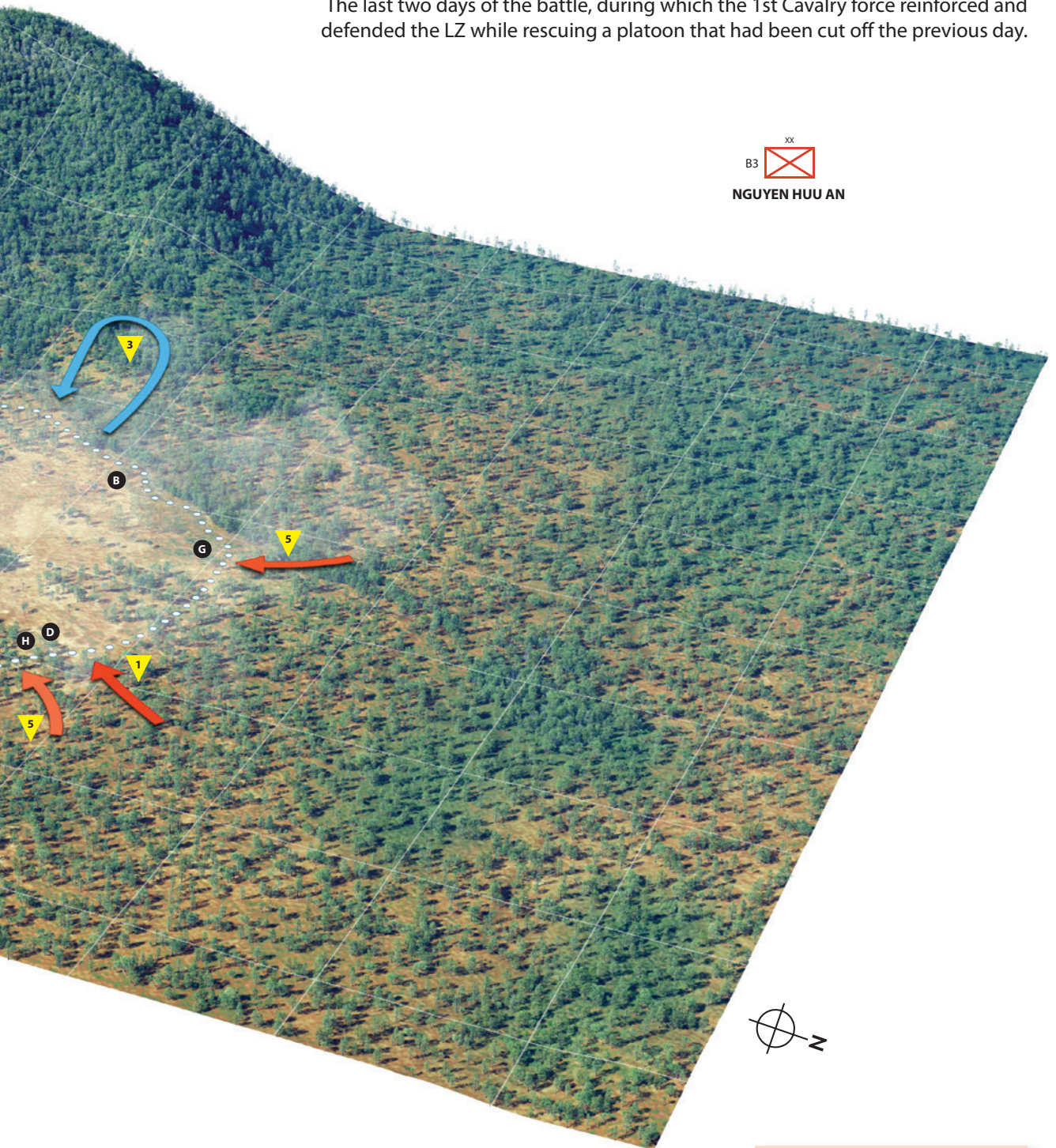
November 16

5. 0422–c. 1000: Remnants of the PAVN 7th Battalion attack the LZ until 0641. Moore orders two minutes of general fire at 0655, which triggers a new assault on Alpha Company on the north side of the perimeter. The attacks taper off at approximately 0800. Moore orders a sweep of the area surrounding the LZ, which results in scattered contacts with PAVN remnants.

LZ X-RAY: NOVEMBER 15–16, 1965

The last two days of the battle, during which the 1st Cavalry force reinforced and defended the LZ while rescuing a platoon that had been cut off the previous day.

xx
B3 
NGUYEN HUU AN



PAVN

Senior Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Huu An

1. 7th Battalion, 66th Regiment (this battalion replaced the 9th, which fought the previous day)

Designed during World War II, the effective A-1E Skyraider ground attack aircraft was something of an anachronism in an age of jet aircraft; it was affectionately nicknamed the "SPAD" by troops on the ground. This 1st Air Commando Squadron A-1E Skyraider returns to its Pleiku base following a sortie. (US Air Force)



at X-Ray. Of the 27 men that Henry Herrick had led into action, eight had been killed and 12 wounded.

At X-Ray the evening of November 15 was relatively uneventful, though American artillery continued to bombard suspected North Vietnamese positions. Having plenty of manpower by this stage, Moore again reorganized his perimeter, ensuring that he had both C and D companies, 1/7 Cavalry in reserve.

Strategic bombers were used in support of a ground battle in Vietnam for the first time when 18 US Air Force B-52Fs bombed the slopes of the Chu Pong Massif late in the afternoon of November 15. Additional "Arc Light" strikes would be directed against the North Vietnamese stronghold through November 22. (US Air Force)

Airpower at X-Ray

As at Plei Me, but even more so, the quantity of airpower employed was staggering. On November 14 USAF A-1s, F-100s, B-57s, and F-4s, and USMC A-4s were all employed in support of Moore's battalion. On the morning of November 15 the forward air controller, Lieutenant Charlie Hastings, became so worried by the ferocity of the PAVN assaults that, at some point between 0600 and 0700, he used the codewords "Broken Arrow," signifying that an American unit was in danger of being overrun and requesting all American combat aircraft in the theater to come to its support. By Hastings' own testimony he soon had aircraft stacked

at 1,000ft intervals from 7,000ft to 35,000ft.

The scale of the American use of airpower in the X-Ray battle went beyond even this. Someone, possibly William Westmoreland, who was keenly interested in reports of the X-Ray fight, requested the employment of the giant B-52 bombers based on Guam. At 1600 on November 15, 18 B-52s dropped over 900 bombs on suspected PAVN positions close to the fighting. At Westmoreland's request, B-52 area bombing strikes (known as Arc Lights) on the Chu Pong Massif continued until November 22, even though the effectiveness of the bombing could not be evaluated. A total of 96 sorties were flown and nearly 5,000 bombs dropped.



The last fight at X-Ray: morning, Tuesday November 16

On the night of November 15 the fog of war still hung thick over X-Ray and its environs. It lay particularly thick over PAVN commanders. At his forward B3 headquarters, An must have known that the 9th Battalion, 66th Regiment had disintegrated and that most of the 7th Battalion was also shattered. But he probably did not know how heavily the Americans at X-Ray had been reinforced. Otherwise his decision to renew offensive action at X-Ray would seem wantonly wasteful of the lives of his men.

An had sent runners to summon 1st Battalion, 33rd Regiment and 8th Battalion, 66th Regiment to the battle, but neither was to play any part in the X-Ray fighting. All he had to mount an assault was 3rd Company, 7th Battalion, previously uncommitted because it had been away fetching rice, and a surviving platoon of 1st Company, 7th Battalion supported by 7th Battalion's mortars and recoilless rifles. At 0400, in darkness, this tiny PAVN force started to probe the southern side of the X-Ray perimeter manned by two companies of the 2/7 Cavalry. At 0420 it mounted a determined attack. But the Americans brought in massive artillery fire (four supporting batteries were now available) and the North Vietnamese made no progress. The Americans suffered only seven lightly wounded in this attack. It was practically over by 0641.

Moore then ordered those on his perimeter to fire continuously for two minutes, commencing at 0655, at any surrounding vegetation that might conceal enemy soldiers. Some North Vietnamese reacted to this by standing up and charging. Few got far. This episode was over by 0715. By 0955 there had been little apparent PAVN activity around X-Ray for some time. Moore, however, was still not sure that the battle was over. He ordered all units on the perimeter to patrol out at least 300m. B Company, 2/7 Cavalry took fire within 75m; a platoon leader was seriously wounded. Moore ordered that all movement should cease. B Company, 2/7 returned to its foxholes on the perimeter and more artillery fire and air strikes were called in. Moore pushed out patrols again and this time no opposition was encountered. By about 1030 Moore was convinced that the PAVN would not attack again.



Second Lieutenant Rick Rescorla leads his platoon in a last sweep outside the American perimeter on the morning of November 16. The sweep followed a final round of air and artillery strikes and met with only token resistance; the battle was now over. (Peter Arnett/AP/Shutterstock)



The toll of three days and nights of combat is evident in the face of this exhausted staff sergeant. (Getty Images)

Aftermath: afternoon, November 16

There was no American counterattack or riposte. So defensively minded had the Americans at X-Ray become that there is no definite evidence that anyone even suggested renewed efforts to storm the Chu Pong Massif. (The bayonet charge led by Hal Moore depicted in the movie *We Were Soldiers*, which results in the PAVN commander being forced to abandon his headquarters, is pure fantasy.)

The Americans lost 79 killed and 121 wounded at X-Ray. They took six prisoners and claimed to have counted 634 PAVN bodies. Moore later admitted that this was false. His men counted few PAVN corpses. He considered that the PAVN removed most of them between attacks. American estimates of North Vietnamese losses were pure conjecture. Evidently two PAVN battalions had been shattered. But it seems unlikely that either had more than 450 troops to begin with. Probably fewer than 900 North Vietnamese soldiers fought at X-Ray. If more than 200 of them had died there, it is difficult to imagine there having been enough left in a fit condition to remove the bodies.

In the late morning two companies of Lieutenant Colonel McDade's 2/7 Cavalry, together with A Company of 1/5 Cavalry, began a 5km march from LZ Columbus (to which they had been diverted when, because of soggy ground, LZ Macon proved unsuitable as a firebase). They arrived at X-Ray around noon. Soon after the fighting stopped, the troops that had been at X-Ray longest were withdrawn by helicopter for rest and recuperation. The process of withdrawing 1/7 Cavalry, Captain Diduryk's B Company, 2/7 Cavalry, and one platoon of Captain Sugdinis's A Company, 2/7 Cavalry began at 1115 and was completed by 1500. These troops flew initially to LZ Falcon and then to Camp Holloway at Pleiku.

The 1st Cavalry Division held a press conference at X-Ray that afternoon, where an exhausted and emotional Hal Moore praised the dedication and resilience of his troops. Then Dick Knowles, who had come to X-Ray for the conference, mystified some journalists by pronouncing that the position on which so much blood had been spilled was to be abandoned the following morning.

LZ ALBANY, NOVEMBER 17–18, 1965

The march to Albany: November 17

Much of the American decision-making that led to the firefight at LZ Albany remains a mystery. It seems that the Americans and South Vietnamese were planning joint operations further west in the Ia Drang Valley in the base area of the badly battered PAVN 32nd Regiment. As a preliminary, the remaining American troops on X-Ray were to move to other landing zones: LZ Albany and LZ Columbus (formerly LZ Cavalair). According to some accounts,

these moves were considered urgent because the USAF intended further B-52 raids on the Chu Pong on November 17, raids which would be too close to X-Ray for safety.

Earlier in the campaign such troop movements were made by helicopter. On this occasion the troops received orders to walk. No American account specifies the reason for this. A reasonable guess is that, at least for the time being, the 1st Cavalry Division had practically flown itself into the ground, having relatively few troop-carrying Hueys fully serviceable and wanting to conserve those it had for emergencies. Though Moore's battalion had been the point of the 1st Cavalry Division spear on November 14, it had enjoyed the services of only 16 slicks. Since then there had been further intense helicopter activity and it is unlikely that the servicing of helicopters and the supply of spare parts had kept up. No document has come to light outlining the whereabouts and condition of 1st Cavalry Division's aircraft on November 17, 1965. The keenest advocates of air mobility in the upper echelons of that division had, perhaps, no interest in making this information public.

The shortage of helicopters and the order to march were, however, not necessarily recipes for disaster. The troops leaving X-Ray were, in some cases, extremely sleep-deprived, but they were not malnourished, diseased, or burdened with wounded. Having just won a sort of limited defensive victory they had no particular reason to be demoralized. None had to walk more than about 5km to reach their destination. The terrain through which they had to move was wooded and much of it covered in long grass but, in general, it was not the sort of dense jungle that needs to be hacked through with machetes. The equivalent of two American battalions was, moreover, marching off X-Ray that morning. That would have been a formidable force for any North Vietnamese likely to be still in the vicinity to take on, especially if the American troops concerned moved in good tactical order and remained alert. The Americans had, in addition, both very substantial artillery support and massive airpower on call.

The Americans got into trouble for three main reasons. First, by marching to two separate destinations, they divided their forces in the face of an enemy still possessing considerable combat power. Second, in the case of many of the troops marching to LZ Albany, they did not move in the most appropriate formation. Finally, the troops going to Albany did not, in many cases, remain alert and ready for combat.

The two battalion-sized forces leaving X-Ray were Lieutenant Colonel Tully's 2/5 Cavalry and Lieutenant Colonel McDade's 2/7 Cavalry—the latter with a number of attachments and detachments. These forces left X-Ray (according to most accounts) at 0900, with Tully's force leading and McDade's following. They were initially moving in the same direction—



1st Cavalry troops gather captured weapons at a collection point at LZ X-Ray. By the battle's conclusion, utter devastation surrounded the American perimeter. (J. D. Coleman Collection/The Vietnam Center and Archive/Texas Tech University)



High-maintenance equipment: a 1st Cavalry UH-1D crew chief inspects the main rotor blade grip seals of his helicopter. The high operational tempo of the 1st Cavalry during the campaign put a severe strain on maintenance crews and the limited supply of replacement parts, which had to be shipped from the United States along the longest logistical chain in US Army history. (Spec. 5 Lawrence J. Sullivan/US Army)

roughly northeast. X-Ray was in a sort of basin and they marched slightly upward to its eastern rim before going slightly downhill toward the landing zones that were their final destinations. Tully's force moved with two rifle companies up and the third following, and it moved slowly and cautiously. At intervals Tully would order pauses in the march and get his supporting batteries to fire ranging shots so that he would be able to bring in concentrations of artillery fire quickly and accurately if attacked. According to most reports, much of McDade's force, by contrast, was moving in a rather loosely organized column in Tully's wake.

At about 1100, about 3km from X-Ray, the two American units reached the point at which their ways would part. Tully's force continued to move roughly northeast to LZ Columbus. McDade's battalion group had to turn 90 degrees to the left to march the remaining distance to LZ Albany—about 2.5km. Within 40 minutes Tully's troops had reached Columbus, where they were welcomed by Lieutenant Colonel Frederick

Ackerson's 1/5 Cavalry and were soon enjoying a hot lunch. For McDade's column the immediate future would be considerably less benign.

McDade made some mistakes. But he was also very unlucky. Unlike Tully, he was not heading for an established American base. "LZ Albany" was just a small clearing marked on some 1st Cavalry Division maps. What no one knew at 1100 on Wednesday November 17, 1965 was that the march route of a North Vietnamese battalion would bring it within a few hundred meters of that place shortly before McDade's force arrived there.

McDade was not careless in the ordinary sense of that term. Indeed he was so cautious that he became hesitant, halting his march twice as his column approached Albany. This hesitancy combined dangerously with a lack of real grip on those under his command. McDade had failed to instil in two of his company commanders the idea that they had not left the combat zone, they were making a dangerous move in the combat zone, and that it was necessary to adopt formations suitable for combat and to keep their men alert. In those companies a fatal degree of slackness and indiscipline ensued.

Captain Joel Sugdinis's Alpha Company of 2/7 Cavalry led the march of McDade's force, adopting a wedge formation and maintaining good order. With Sugdinis's company was the battalion reconnaissance platoon, led by Second Lieutenant David P. Payne. It formed the leading tip of Sugdinis's wedge. Two other rifle platoons advanced side by side behind it. Sugdinis's command group was behind them with the mortar platoon to the rear. At the rear of McDade's column was Alpha Company, 1/5 Cavalry, under

Captain George Forrest. Most accounts indicate that it too moved in a wedge formation and maintained good order, though, perhaps owing to Forrest's caution, it seems to have lagged somewhat behind the rest of the column. Charlie and Delta companies, 2/7 Cavalry, in the middle of the column, were in the worst shape. By midday both seem to have been strung out in platoon columns, one platoon behind another, lacking any real flank protection.

The personnel in Charlie and Delta companies fell into states of dangerous inattention during two halts called by McDade. The first of these occurred after Payne's reconnaissance platoon captured two North Vietnamese soldiers about 100–200m (accounts vary) from the clearing called Albany. Accounts also differ on the time, but this may have been at 1240. The prisoners were interrogated through an interpreter, the interrogation lasting possibly half an hour. McDade's column halted while this was going on; many men lay down and some fell asleep. The prisoners said they were sick with malaria and demoralized by American bombing. They claimed to be deserters, though their American captors doubted this. They provided no useful intelligence. One Vietnamese Communist history indicates that they were part of a five-man helicopter ambush team belonging to 1st Battalion, 33rd Regiment and that other members of the team escaped, spreading news of the arrival of American troops in the area.

After the interrogation had finished, the advance resumed, the reconnaissance platoon entering the clearing from east–southeast at 1307. Albany was roughly square with sides 300–400m long. Projecting into the middle of the clearing from the west was a grove of trees and some big termite mounds. Alpha Company's platoons proceeded to occupy the clearing. But before moving the rest of his column onto Albany, sometime between 1309 and 1312, McDade decided to call another halt. He wanted to instruct his company commanders as to how he wanted them to dispose their troops on the Albany clearing. To do so he summoned them to a meeting on the edge of the clearing. This separated the company commanders from the companies they were supposed to be commanding and left his command strung out in a 500m-long column with very vulnerable flanks. Once again many men slumped to the ground and began to doze. Some fell asleep. The company commander who had furthest to go to reach McDade was Captain Forrest, commander of A Company, 1/5 Cavalry at the back of the column. At approximately 1315 a storm of fire swept across Albany. Forrest immediately ran back to join his company.

During the overland withdrawal of 2/7 Cavalry from LZ X-Ray, a reconnaissance platoon in the van of the column captured two PAVN prisoners near a clearing designated LZ Albany. This was the first contact in a chance meeting between US and North Vietnamese columns that rapidly developed into what would be the 1st Cavalry Division's bloodiest battle of the campaign. (Henry L. Dunn Collection/The Vietnam Center and Archive/Texas Tech University)



Note: gridlines are shown at intervals of 250m (273 yards)

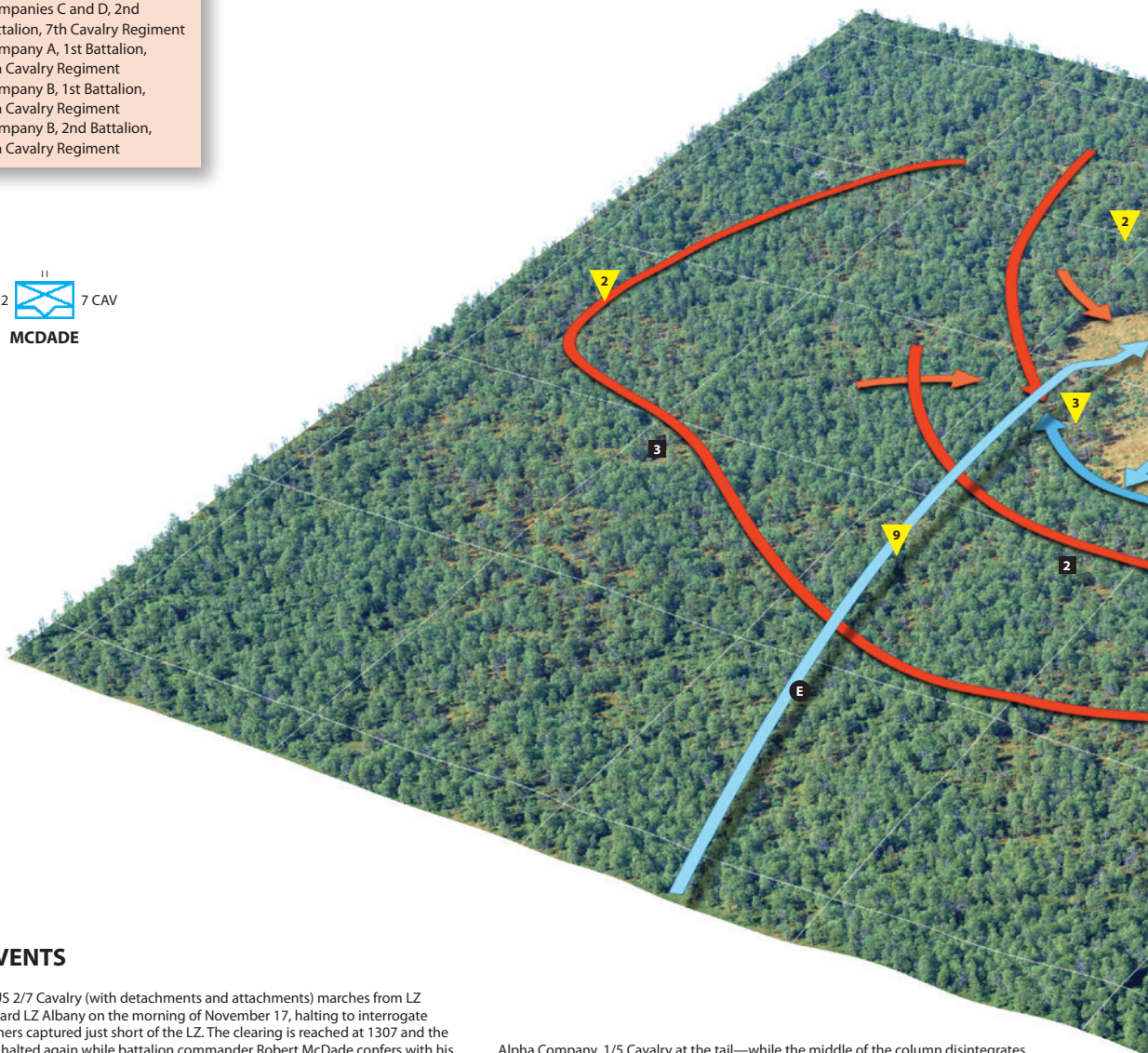
US

Lieutenant Colonel Robert McDade

- A. Company A, 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment; and Headquarters, 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment
- B. Companies C and D, 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment
- C. Company A, 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry Regiment
- D. Company B, 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry Regiment
- E. Company B, 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment



MCDADE



EVENTS

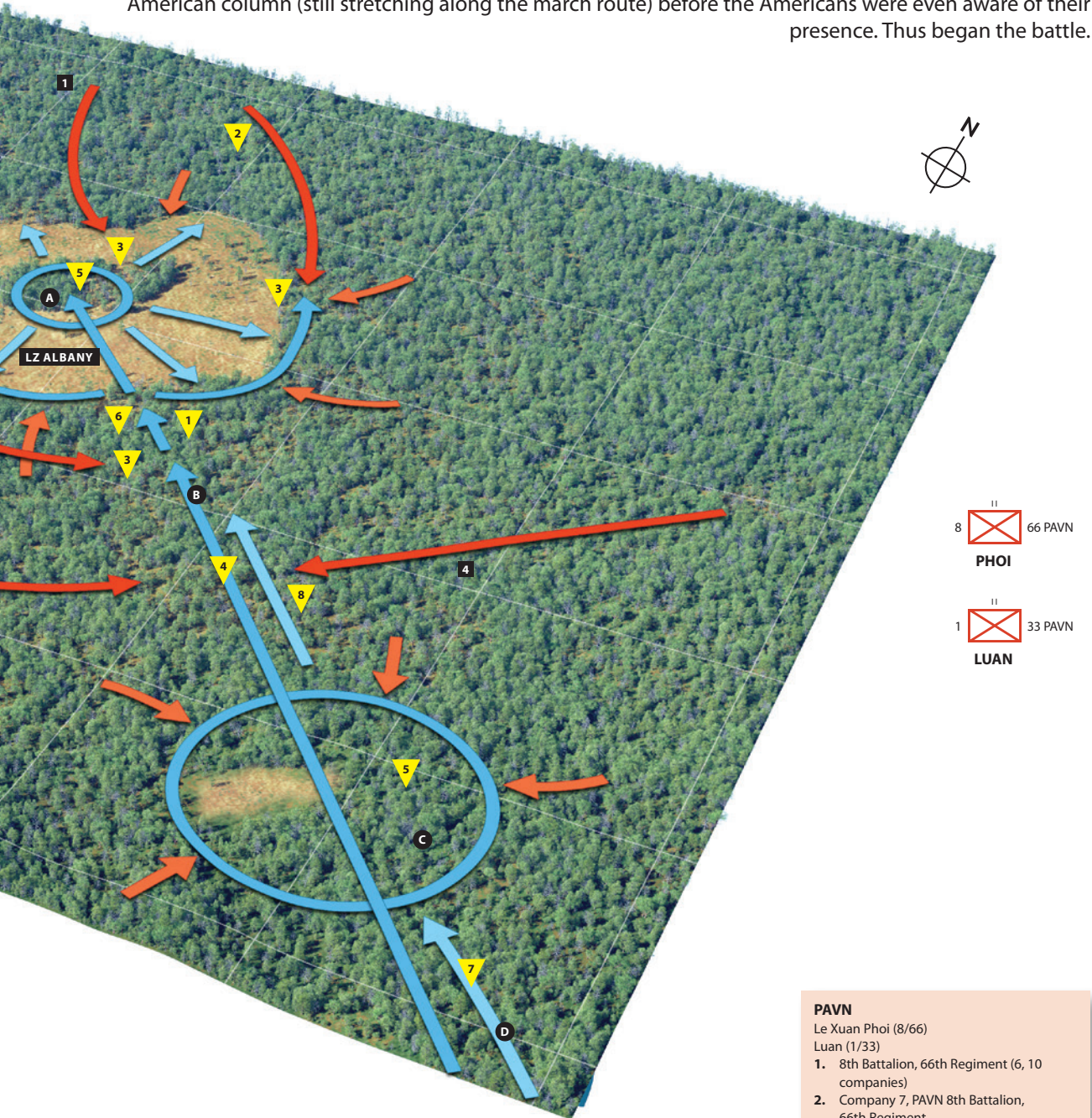
1. The US 2/7 Cavalry (with detachments and attachments) marches from LZ X-Ray toward LZ Albany on the morning of November 17, halting to interrogate two prisoners captured just short of the LZ. The clearing is reached at 1307 and the column is halted again while battalion commander Robert McDade confers with his company commanders.
2. Meanwhile, the PAVN 8th Battalion, 66th Regiment, pausing in its march toward LZ X-Ray for lunch by the Ia Drang a few hundred meters north of Albany, receives word of the nearby American force. Commander Le Xuan Phoi immediately deploys his 6th Company and heavy weapons of 10th Company to blocking positions, while recalling 8th Company, which had resumed its march to X-Ray before the other companies. 7th Company is placed in reserve.
3. Phoi's attack is launched at 1315 on the unsuspecting 1st Cavalry soldiers as they advance into the LZ. The head of the column is assaulted by the PAVN 6th and 10th companies. The reserve 7th Company will soon be pitched in as well.
4. The hastily retrieved 8th Company attacks the column along its left flank, joined by 7th Company and by elements of the PAVN 1st Battalion, 33rd Regiment that independently attack the right flank. The battle in this area becomes a melee as the forces intermingling.
5. Within half an hour of the initial attack, leading and trailing elements of the American column have formed into effective defensive perimeters—Alpha Company, 1/7; the battalion command group; and the battalion recon platoon at the head and

Alpha Company, 1/5 Cavalry at the tail—while the middle of the column disintegrates. Survivors attempt to link up with the perimeters.

6. US air and artillery strikes begin to hammer North Vietnamese troop concentrations at around 1415, relieving pressure on the American soldiers. Initial strikes hit massed PAVN troops at the southeast edge of the clearing—where the American troops had entered the LZ—but target North Vietnamese in every part of the battlefield throughout the remainder of the engagement.
7. Bravo Company, 1/5 Cavalry arrives at 1640 from an overland march to reinforce the perimeter maintained by Alpha Company, 1/5 Cavalry.
8. After evacuating wounded by helicopter, the combined force attempts to join the other perimeter in the LZ, but is stopped a few hundred meters short and remains in place overnight.
9. Bravo Company, 2/7 Cavalry air assaults into the western portion of the LZ at 1830 to reinforce the small perimeter established there. The perimeter is expanded to include the entire LZ. Throughout the night, continued air and artillery strikes pound North Vietnamese positions while ground forces exchange fire and retrieve the wounded. By dawn of November 18, the PAVN force has departed, leaving the Americans in control of the battlefield.

LZ ALBANY, NOVEMBER 17, 1965

On November 17, after the conclusion of the battle at LZ X-Ray, the 2/7 Cavalry marched overland toward a small clearing designated LZ Albany a few kilometers to the north-northeast. The PAVN 8th Battalion, 66th Infantry Regiment was at that time marching in the opposite direction, toward X-Ray. The North Vietnamese commander Le Xuan Phoi was faster to react to the chance encounter than Robert McDade, his American counterpart, and quickly moved his troops into positions around the LZ and the flanks of the American column (still stretching along the march route) before the Americans were even aware of their presence. Thus began the battle.

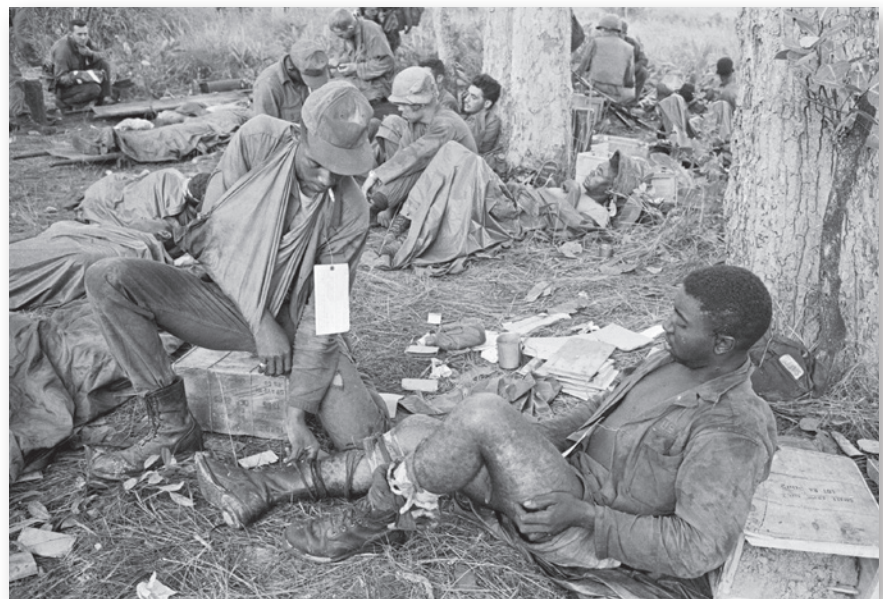


The PAVN advance to LZ Albany and the initial attacks on McDade's column

Explaining why a PAVN force was in a position to attack McDade's force at this place and time takes us back to the X-Ray battle. We noted that Lieutenant Colonel An arrived on the eastern edge of the Chu Pong Massif to establish a forward B3 headquarters on the afternoon of November 14 after the X-Ray battle had started. At that time he had not established reliable communications with all the PAVN battalions in the area and may not have known precisely where some of them were located. In the early stages of the X-Ray fighting An had been preoccupied with trying to exert some sort of control over the two battalions of the 66th Regiment that were on the Chu Pong Massif. By his own account it was not until the evening of November 15 that he sent for the 8th Battalion, 66th Regiment, which was at Ba Bi several kilometers north and west of the rest of the regiment, on the wrong (northwestern) side of the Ia Drang. Even when radio communication was available, the PAVN seems to have been wary of using it, fearing American signals interception and concomitant pinpointing of PAVN headquarters and troop concentrations. An sent runners—two teams of them according to one source.

An's message to the 8th Battalion demanded that it should march without delay to join the rest of the 66th Regiment (or what remained of it) on the Chu Pong Massif. Clearly An's intention was to pitch the 8th Battalion into the X-Ray battle. If, however, the 8th Battalion encountered American forces on the march, its commander was authorized to engage them. According to one source this message only reached 8th Battalion on the afternoon of November 16. By that time the fighting at X-Ray had ended. But that information would not have been available to the runners bringing the orders, nor to their recipient, the 8th Battalion commander Le Xuan Phoi.

Probably not favoring a night march through the jungle and needing some time to prepare, Phoi did not get his battalion moving until the morning of November 17. The battalion consisted of the usual three rifle companies and



A wounded American medic treats other casualties while awaiting evacuation from LZ Albany. Severe fatigue, poor march discipline, and mischance led to a debacle as the PAVN 8th Battalion overran the stalled American column. (Bettmann/Getty Images)

a heavy weapons company. Attached was a 12.7mm heavy machine-gun company with six guns and a full combat load of ammunition. Well aware of the possibility of encountering American units, Phoi organized his battalion to move in a formation suitable for an encounter battle. But its march was sometimes disrupted by American air strikes and became ragged, with the companies widely separated at times. It had stopped to eat lunch on the bank of the Ia Drang, not far from LZ Albany, when Phoi received a report that American troops (McDade's column) were approaching.

There are several Vietnamese Communist accounts of the Albany fighting, and, as with American accounts, they differ considerably in matters of detail. All suggest that Phoi knew of the proximity of an American column before the Americans became aware of the presence of a substantial body of North Vietnamese. But they differ as to the magnitude of his time advantage. It may have been about 45 minutes. It was enough to allow Phoi to seize the initiative. He placed one rifle company (the 6th) supported by a heavy weapons company (the 10th) directly in front of the advancing American column. He placed another rifle company (the 7th) in reserve behind them. His remaining rifle company (the 8th) had already resumed its march toward the Chu Pong Massif. He sent runners to catch it, turn it round, and pitch it into the flank of the American column.

The 6th Company of Phoi's battalion waited until the leading American platoons got within 30 or 40m before opening fire. When they did, the effect was devastating: many Americans immediately dropped to the ground dead or wounded. At the same time, the battalion's 82mm mortars started dropping rounds further back along the American column. The 6th Company then charged the most forward American troops and started killing them at close range with assault rifles and bayonets. The 8th Company, which had been ahead of the other companies on the march and which had to be called back, charged into the flank of the American column, cutting it in two. It performed this feat with only two of its three rifle platoons. The third platoon, presumably as a result of the confusion caused by the sudden change of direction, got lost. Then, probably no more than 20 minutes or so into the battle, Phoi committed his only reserve, throwing the 7th Company into the fight alongside the 8th.

The 1st Battalion of the PAVN 33rd Regiment (or what was left of it) was also in this area. Shortly earlier the reconnaissance platoon of 2/7 Cavalry had captured two men from one of its patrols. Others had fled and may have alerted both their own battalion and Phoi's. Vietnamese Communist sources do not suggest that there was any joint planning between 8th Battalion, 66th Regiment and the 1st Battalion, 33rd Regiment. But once battle was joined, Comrade Luan, deputy commander of 1st Battalion, 33rd Regiment, acting on his own initiative, threw the 1st and 2nd companies of that battalion into the fight. It seems probable that these 33rd Regiment subunits struck McDade's column from the other side—from the column's right. One Vietnamese Communist account describes the Americans at Albany as soon "surrounded on all four sides." American sources generally agree that McDade's column was soon under attack from all directions.

Captain George Forrest's Alpha Company, 1/5 Cavalry, at the rear of the column, was better off than the others. As soon as the North Vietnamese attack began, Forrest, without even asking McDade's permission, turned







LZ ALBANY, NOVEMBER 17, 1965 (PP. 82–83)

Troops of the PAVN 8th Battalion, 66th Regiment assault the command group of Alpha Company, 2/7 Cavalry at LZ Albany early in the afternoon of November 17. The battle commenced around 1315 with a devastating attack by the North Vietnamese on the 2/7 Cavalry, then just beginning to enter the LZ after an overland march from LZ X-Ray, with Alpha Company in the van. Already understrength by a platoon, Alpha Company was hit especially hard in the initial attack, losing its remaining two rifle platoons. It was soon cut off from the other companies of the American column, then engaged in a desperate melee to the east of the LZ. Surviving members of the battalion recon platoon and Alpha Company command group, along with battalion command personnel, hastily formed a redoubt in a grove of trees in the middle of Albany. The beleaguered American troops centered their defense around three termite mounds within the grove. There, they faced a number of platoon and company-sized assaults, along with sustained intense fire from all directions: North Vietnamese troops were firing from the clearing tree line from concealed positions in the tall grass or behind trees; others

were firing from atop termite mounds, and yet others had lashed themselves into the tops of trees. PAVN 8th Battalion commander Le Xuan Phoi had positioned his troops to advantage, instructing them to close with the American troops and prevent the use of the air and artillery support that had proven so ruinous to the North Vietnamese battalions at X-Ray. In the chaos that ensued, casualties were extremely heavy on both sides and American resistance was reduced to the perimeter set up in the LZ, and an isolated perimeter at the tail of the column, several hundred meters away.

Not long after the perimeter was established in the grove, Lieutenant Larry Gwin of the Alpha Company command element, then situated at the western side of the grove, spotted a group of roughly 20 North Vietnamese (1) charging their position from across the clearing. Six determined American officers and enlisted men (2) engaged the North Vietnamese, stopping them barely 20 meters from their position. This was but one of many assaults hurled at the survivors of the initial attack, who held on until the arrival of air and artillery support turned the tide in their favor.

and ran back down the column. He reached his company unscathed, though two radio operators with him were killed. Effective leadership was one factor that enabled Forrest's company to survive with fewer casualties. But having lagged somewhat behind the rest of the column was also in its favor. It seems to have escaped the worst fury of the initial PAVN attacks, seems not to have been fully surrounded in the early stages, and had more time to establish an effective defense.

Two groups of Americans managed to form coherent defensive perimeters relatively early in the battle. Forrest's company, at the rear of the column, was, as we have noted, one of these. The other consisted of Sugdinis' Alpha Company, 2/7, some of 2/7's headquarters company, and others who had been with McDade when the shooting started. These elements established a perimeter around the termite mounds near the center of the Albany clearing. Most accounts suggest that McDade was ineffective as a commander once the battle began. But other officers who were with him managed to call in artillery and air strikes and to give Colonel Brown, who was soon circling over the battle area in a helicopter, at least some idea of the situation on the ground. Officers within the termite mound perimeter realized that Americans who were wounded and pinned down lay all over the clearing. If they brought in air strikes to assist their own defense, they risked killing these comrades. They concluded that if any of them were to survive, such strikes were absolutely necessary.

Forrest had stayed in touch with supporting artillery during the march to Albany. Once the battle started, he was able to bring in supporting fires quickly. The first air strikes struck around Albany about an hour into the battle, those in the termite mound perimeter marking their positions with smoke. One Vietnamese Communist account notes that, "artillery and air strikes ... flattened whole sections of old-growth virgin forest. The sky itself seemed to have disappeared, replaced by swirling clouds of dust, smoke, and ash. The air became difficult to breathe, filled with the stench of napalm and burning trees." Fighting persisted at Albany all day and for most of the



An injured US soldier is given assistance. The decision to allow close air strikes brought US troops through the most critical phase of the battle. (Bettmann/Getty Images)

American dead are removed from the battlefield on the morning of November 18. The battle at LZ Albany resulted in the highest casualty figures experienced by the US Army since the Korean War; at its conclusion, 70 percent of McDade's force was killed, missing, or wounded. Second Lieutenant Rick Rescorla described the scene as a "long, bloody traffic accident in the jungle." (AP Images/TopFoto)



night. But most of the American casualties probably occurred in the first hour of the battle, after which PAVN assaults became rather less intense. About an hour into the fighting Phoi sustained a wound that put him out of action immediately and would kill him by nightfall. Other North Vietnamese officers who tried to take command met similar fates.

American reinforcements and the latter stages of the Albany battle

Brown was later criticized for not adequately alerting Knowles to the crisis at Albany or not requesting his help. Instead he tried to deal with it from 3rd Brigade's resources. Shortly after 1400 he ordered Bravo Company, 1/5 Cavalry to march from LZ Columbus to join Forrest's company of the same battalion. Having first organized the extraction by helicopter of wounded men from Forrest's company, the two companies were to move forward together until they linked up with the group defending the termite mound in the clearing at Albany. This plan was partially successful. Bravo and Alpha companies, 1/5 Cavalry linked up at 1640, organized a small landing zone, and summoned helicopters to take to hospital the most seriously hurt. But having advanced a few hundred meters toward the Albany clearing, they came under fire and halted. It was getting dark by this time and they decided to establish a perimeter for the night.

Brown also ordered Captain Diduryk's B Company, 2/7 Cavalry, which had fought at X-Ray and had only 83 men fit for combat, to fly from Camp Holloway at Pleiku to the clearing at Albany. The 15 slicks that brought them landed without incident at approximately 1830. The same aircraft took out wounded on their return trip. Captain Diduryk took command at Albany, integrating all the survivors there into his own company. Americans in the 2/7 Cavalry perimeter at Albany itself and the Alpha/Bravo, 1/5 Cavalry perimeter a couple of hundred meters away were now reasonably safe. But for Americans lying between or around

those perimeters—many of them wounded survivors of Charlie and Delta companies, 2/7 Cavalry—the hours of darkness were nightmarish. Vengeful PAVN soldiers roamed the battlefield trying to find wounded, isolated Americans and finish them off.

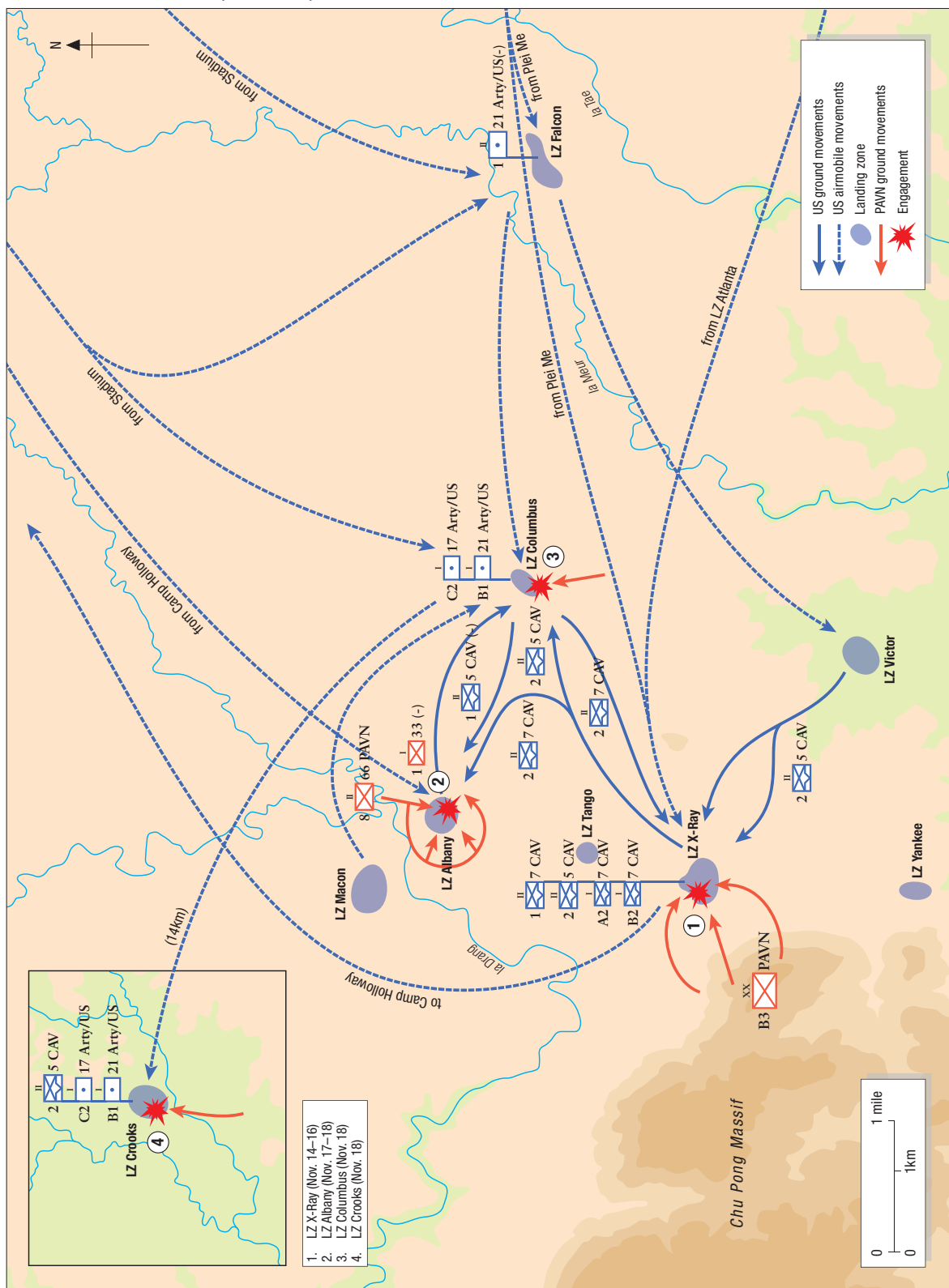
The aftermath of Albany: November 18

By morning, however, it was over. The Americans were left in possession of the battlefield and proceeded to police it. McDade's force had been about 400 strong when the battle began. It had suffered approximately 70 percent casualties, including 151 killed, five missing, and 121 wounded—proportionally staggering losses, the scale of which sent a shudder through the American command and American new media. The 1st Cavalry Division's after-action report claimed that the North Vietnamese had suffered 403 fatalities. This was conjecture. The Americans counted nothing like so many PAVN corpses. It is nevertheless likely that the PAVN's losses were considerably heavier than those of its opponents. The North Vietnamese hated to abandon serviceable weapons, yet the Americans claim to have picked up 212 assault rifles and carbines, 39 light machine guns, eight rocket launchers, and six 82mm mortars.



A CH-47A Chinook sits at LZ Albany after the battle. Despite a string of victories for South Vietnamese and American forces, the Pleiku campaign exposed serious shortcomings in the US Army's experiment in air mobility. These would need to be addressed if the concept were to succeed. (Henry L. Dunn Collection/The Vietnam Center and Archive/Texas Tech University)

Actions at LZs X-Ray, Albany, Columbus, and Crooks, November 14–18, 1965



LZ CROOKS AND LZ COLUMBUS, NOVEMBER 18, 1965

Very poor handling of the press by 1st Cavalry Division in the aftermath of the Albany fight was one of the first episodes to sow suspicion between the American military and the American media in this war. Albany also seems to have considerably lessened General Westmoreland's enthusiasm for continuing the Pleiku campaign and to have precipitated another change of brigades.

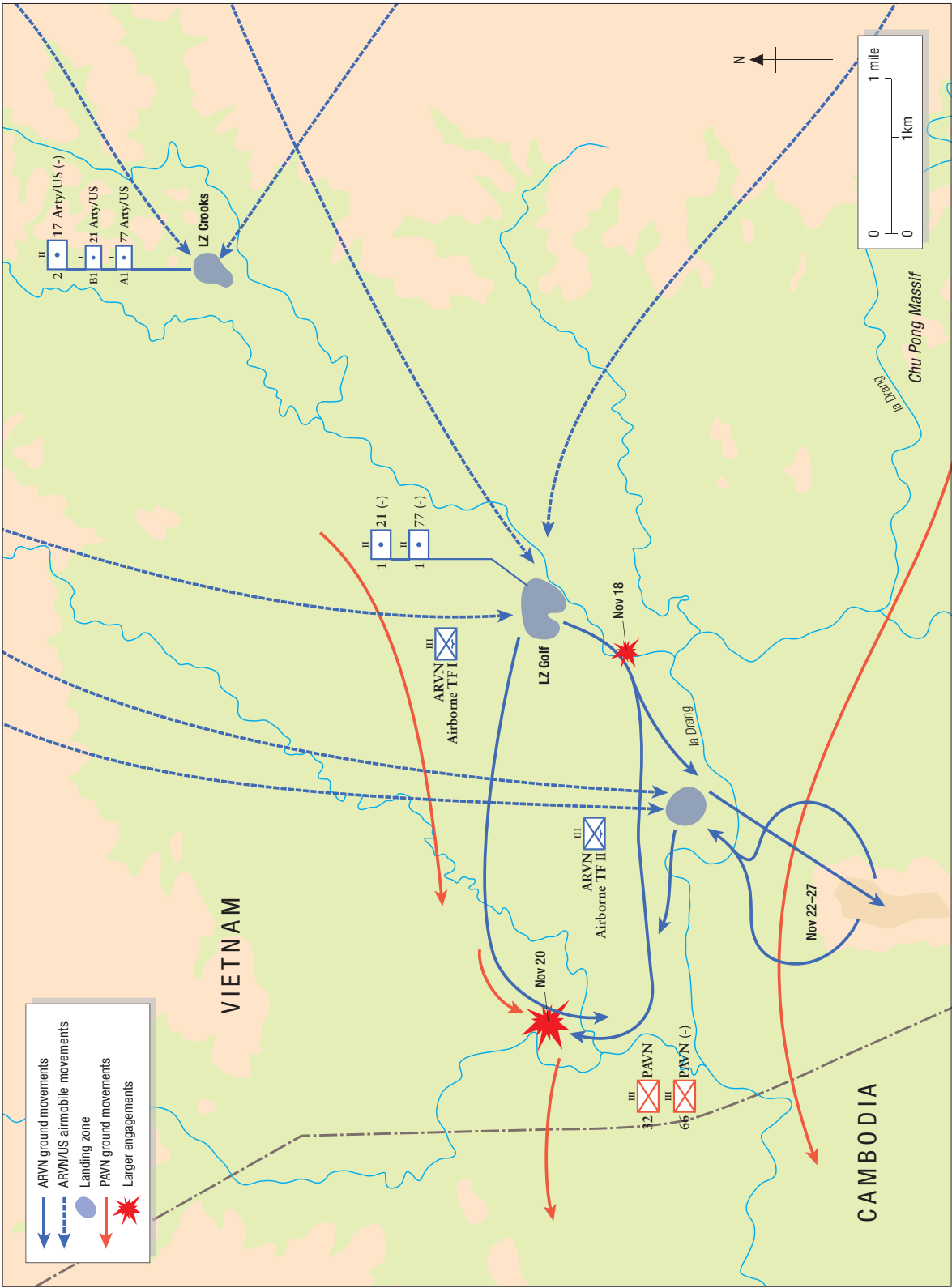
The South Vietnamese high command had earlier sensed great opportunity in this campaign and was keen to get its forces more heavily involved. In discussions with the Americans, it had been decided that two battalions of the ARVN Airborne Brigade should strike south from the Special Forces camp at Duc Co in an effort to inflict, in cooperation with 3rd Brigade, further damage on North Vietnamese forces before they retreated into Cambodia. After Albany, however, it was decided that the American brigade assisting the ARVN would be Colonel William "Ray" Lynch's 2nd Brigade, while Colonel Tim Brown's 3rd Brigade was withdrawn from the campaign. Who made the decision to withdraw 3rd Brigade is not entirely clear. It is, however, reasonably certain that Brown's handling of the battle at Albany annoyed his superiors, probably because he failed to inform them promptly enough of the magnitude of the crisis that unfolded there and of the seriousness of the losses suffered. His career never altogether recovered.

On November 18, however, before it was withdrawn from the campaign, 3rd Brigade would fight two small actions. On that date Brown sent Lieutenant Colonel Tully's 2/5 Cavalry on an air assault intended to open up LZ Crooks, 14km northwest of LZ Columbus and only 7km from where the main concentration of the PAVN 32nd Regiment (or what was left of it) had been identified. The main purpose of this was to secure an artillery firebase from which 1st Cavalry Division artillery could support the operations of the ARVN Airborne Brigade. The PAVN (probably elements of 32nd Regiment) probed Crooks that night but only tentatively. One American was wounded. The North Vietnamese left two bodies behind. On the same night there was a larger firefight at LZ Columbus. At 1745 surviving elements of the PAVN 33rd Regiment attacked the base, mainly from the south, supported by mortar and rocket fire. The Americans responded with artillery and air strikes as well as infantry weapons. The PAVN broke contact and withdrew around midnight. The Americans lost three killed and suffered 13 wounded. The PAVN left 27 bodies behind.

ARVN AIRBORNE BRIGADE OPERATIONS, NOVEMBER 18–27, 1965

Between November 18 and 27 the ARVN Airborne Brigade conducted a complex series of operations south of the Special Forces camp at Duc Co. Discussions between the South Vietnamese and American high commands had anticipated joint operations involving two battalions of the Airborne Brigade. American enthusiasm for continuing the Pleiku campaign seems to have dropped markedly after Albany, but South Vietnamese keenness to get involved did not. The result was that the last phase of the campaign was conducted by ARVN airborne infantry with the 1st Cavalry Division

Joint ARVN-US operations, November 18–27, 1965



providing fire support from two bases: LZ Crooks and LZ Golf. The ARVN compensated for the lack of participation by American ground troops by ultimately bringing in five of their airborne battalions rather than the two originally contemplated.

An American advisors' after-action report on the ARVN Airborne Brigade's *Than Phong (Divine Wind)* 7 indicates that the mission was to destroy Communist forces in a tactical area of responsibility extending from Duc Co south along the Cambodian border to the Ia Drang, and to "provide a blocking force astride the Ia Drang river near the Cambodian border for the first Cav Div operating to the East." ARVN and US intelligence officers thought that the main PAVN force likely to be encountered in this area was the 32nd Regiment, though that might get some support from elements of the 66th Regiment and from locally recruited Communist units.

On November 18 three ARVN Airborne battalions were concentrated at Duc Co. Helicopters for the intended air assault into the Ia Drang Valley were provided by the US Army's 52nd Aviation Battalion, based at Pleiku. By November 22 five ARVN Airborne battalions organized into two task forces were operating in the Drang Valley. Task Force I, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Truong Quang An and comprising three battalions, crossed the fast-flowing Ia Drang on log and bamboo bridges and operated south of the river. Task Force II, under Lieutenant Colonel Ngo Quang Truong, operated north of the river with the other two battalions. On both sides of the river the ARVN found and destroyed PAVN camps, some of which had been heavily fortified. When the 6th Airborne Battalion attacked one camp south of the river on November 24, PAVN troops there were reported by American advisors to have "panicked and fled." The operation was wound down November 25–27 as the battalions involved returned to Duc Co, apparently on foot, "searching and clearing as they went."

According to the American advisors' after-action report the "operation was quickly planned and rapidly executed. The maneuver plan was sound and the US artillery provided excellent fire support." The ARVN lost 21 killed and 50 wounded, while (on the basis of advisors' body count) killing 265 North Vietnamese and capturing ten. There was also a considerable haul of captured weapons and documents. The operation was founded on good intelligence, much of it apparently based on the reconnaissance by South Vietnamese Special Forces.

A battery of 1st Cavalry 105mm howitzers conducts a fire mission during the Ia Drang Valley battles. Artillery support was an indispensable adjunct to operations throughout the campaign. The 1st Cavalry Division's first and final contributions to the Pleiku campaign were made by its artillery, both times in support of joint ARVN–US operations. (J. D. Coleman Collection/The Vietnam Center and Archive/Texas Tech University)



AFTERMATH

The Communist campaign initiated by Chu Huy Man and his B3 headquarters in mid-October 1965 proved, at least on the surface of things, a complete failure: ARVN II Corps' mobile reserves were not destroyed; Plei Me was not captured. All three PAVN regiments under the B3 Front's command were obliged to retreat into Cambodia in late November in an appalling state. We do not have reliable figures for their losses from combat, malnutrition, and disease but, at least for the time being, they had ceased to exist as fighting units. The morale of the survivors was shattered. Discipline collapsed. The memoirs of the B3 political commissar, Dang Vu Hiep, are graphic:

The units were enveloped in ... gloom ... Some men allowed themselves to become filthy and refused to wash ... Many wrote letters home saying that sooner or later the writer would die or become disabled ... Soldiers stole from each other, took chickens from civilian homes and went round firing their weapons indiscriminately. Camp discipline broke down and there was an increase in troops ... defecating indiscriminately all around the area.

The collective losses sustained by American and South Vietnamese units were nothing like as great as those on the Communist side, and there was no such

1st Cavalry troopers clean their weapons after Albany. The Pleiku campaign was unusual in that both sides claimed victory: American and ARVN forces could claim unquestioned mastery of the battlefield, yet the North Vietnamese, despite the disastrous consequences of their strategy, were heartened at the magnitude of US casualties, predicting that future costly battles would weaken the American political will to continue the fight. (PhotoQuest/Getty Images)





collapse of morale and discipline. American and South Vietnamese forces could legitimately congratulate themselves on having foiled an important Communist offensive.

From the American point of view, however, there were disturbing aspects to the campaign. Having large numbers of helicopters undoubtedly offered great advantages. Yet in Pleiku in October–November, 1965 air mobility had not proved as effective as its most passionate advocates had hoped. In the heavily forested and mountainous Central Highlands, even finding the enemy had proved very difficult much of the time. It had rarely been possible to bring the enemy to battle against his will and there were no successful “vertical envelopments.” Supporting even a single airmobile brigade in the Central Highlands in the frenetic style of operations characteristic of the 1st Cavalry Division at this period put gigantic strain on the whole American logistical system in Vietnam. That style of operations, moreover, put such mechanical strain on the helicopters that the 1st Cavalry Division seems to have (at least temporarily) flown itself into the ground by late November 1965.

Despite its massive technological inferiority, the skills and fighting qualities of the PAVN were such that it could inflict serious casualties on the Americans. The Americans could find no way of winning this war quickly. In the long run they would find such casualties difficult to accept. The American military’s mishandling of the news media in relation to Albany caused a degree of mistrust, which would tend to worsen over time. The Pleiku campaign thus exposed American long-term weaknesses—things that did not bode well for the anti-Communist side’s long-term prospects in this war.

Robert McNamara briefs the press at the Pentagon during the Ia Drang Valley battles. The importance of public relations was understood by many, but by no means all, American commanders. In the years that followed, the US Army would learn to its cost the perils of misinforming the American public. North Vietnamese commanders had no comparable difficulties: state censorship assured acceptance of the party line. (US Army)

THE BATTLEFIELDS TODAY

BELOW LEFT

Enemies no longer: Hal Moore and a large American contingent meet with Nguyen Huu An on a 1993 trip to the Ia Drang Valley battlefields. Here the group poses at LZ X-Ray: (left to right, standing) Ramon "Tony" Nadal, George Forrest, Vu Dinh Thuoc, Tran Minh Hao, Hal Moore, Larry Gwin, Nguyen Huu An, Fred Rohrbach, Ernie Savage, Basil Plumley, Joe Galloway, Bill Beck; (kneeling) John Herren, Bruce Crandall, and Jack Smith. (Courtesy Fred Rohrbach)

BELOW RIGHT

The Chu Pong Massif looms over the site of LZ X-Ray in July 2014 just as it did a half-century earlier, during the first major battle between American and North Vietnamese regular troops. The location is still remote, but much of the area is now a vast rubber plantation. (Michael Dineen Collection/The Vietnam Center and Archive/Texas Tech University)

Modern Vietnam is a major tourist destination. But the government is sensitive about some of its border areas, and the main Ia Drang battlefields such as LZs X-Ray, Albany, and Mary were deemed out of bounds to tourists when the present writer was last in this part of the Highlands. But the town of Pleiku, the Catecka tea plantation, and the ruins of the Plei Me Special Forces camp can be visited. As well as being accessible by road, Pleiku has an airport. Tour guides there can arrange trips to Catecka and Plei Me. Even in 1965, however, what the Saigon government called Pleiku Province the Communists called Gia Lai. It is Gia Lai Province today. Remembering this will avoid confusion.

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This book is based on careful research of surviving documents and interviews of participants in the events we relate. Each source provides a nuanced and a distinctive way of relating a piece of history to the greater whole, yet as is so often the case, not all sources agree on every point. We have done our best as authors to weigh the information and set forth the record objectively; the conclusions reached in this book and opinions expressed, as well as any interpretive faults, are wholly our own.

A note on map sources

The six flat maps and three "bird's-eye view" projections in this book are based on contemporaneous 1:50,000 and 1:250,000 series topographic maps prepared by the US Army and also draw on maps in the following published and unpublished works:

Carland, J., *Stemming the Tide: May 1965 to October 1966: The United States Army in Vietnam*. US Army Center of Military History, Washington, DC, 2000
U.S. Army. *Combat Operations After-Action Report for Pleiku Campaign (Operations Report—Lessons Learned, Report 3-66)*, 1966
Vinh Loc, Nguyen, *Why Plei Me?*, Information Printing Office, Saigon, 1966

Air Cavalry unit abbreviations

Abbreviations in this book such as "1/7" refer to the relevant battalion/regiment, in this instance "1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment." However, "1/9" refers to the 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry Regiment—an airmobile reconnaissance squadron.

Acronyms

ATF	armored task force
ARA	aerial rocket artillery
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
CIDG	Civilian Irregular Defense Force
COMUSMACV	Commander, United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam
CTZ	Corps Tactical Zone
HHC	Headquarters and Headquarters Company
LAW	Light Anti-tank Weapon
LZ	landing zone
MACV	Military Assistance Command Vietnam
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam
ROTC	Reserve Officer Training Corps
RVNAF	Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces
SF	Special Forces
USASF	US Army Special Forces
VNAF	(South) Vietnamese Air Force
VNSF	South Vietnamese Special Forces

Conversions

1 kilometer = 0.62 miles
1 meter = 3.28 feet
1 centimeter = 0.39 inches
1 metric ton = 1.1 US ("short") tons
1 kilogram = 2.2 pounds

